

THE DEARGUARD

Sydney C. Grier

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TO THE READER

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The Rearguard

BY

SYDNEY C. GRIER, *author.*

AUTHOR OF 'THE WARDEN OF THE MARCHES,'
'A ROYAL MARRIAGE,' ETC.

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY A. PEARSE

THIRD IMPRESSION

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THE REARGUARD.

PROLOGUE.

THE young people from the Hall and the Rectory were gathered in the Dingle, their special domain, and the Squire's eldest son and the Rector's eldest daughter, who were grown-up and engaged, paused in their stroll to gaze with a benevolent interest, not wholly unmixed with contempt, on the group of which six months ago they would have formed a part. Theodosia Tourneur looked down upon her young brother, idle as usual, and her two sisters—Laetitia with a book, and Emily with a lapful of wild roses, out of which she was twining a garland for her hair. Both occupations were characteristic, and in Theodosia's eyes equally reprehensible. Why could not the little girls have brought their sewing, like Agnes Berringer? Charles Berringer saw his sister, and his two brothers, with Tony Ridding, the attorney's son, who had been Gilbert's shadow of late, and the curate, Edward Donnellan, whom circumstances rather than choice or aptitude had pitchforked into the position of tutor to the boys. Tutor and pupils were all stretched on the short Down grass in attitudes indicative of well-earned repose after strenuous labour, for threatening clouds in the morning had induced Mr Donnellan to grant a whole holiday, that his charges and he might help to save the hay. The hay

was duly saved—though the Squire's bailiff hinted darkly that this was in spite of, rather than owing to, the efforts of the young gentlemen—the threatened storm had not come, and the workers were discussing the day's doings for the edification of the girls.

"Yes, the horses ran away, and Gilbert stopped them," said Mr Donnellan. "We are all uncommonly proud of him."

"Gilbert! you might have been killed." Agnes lifted her mild eyes from her work, half admiring, half reproving, as her brother wriggled uneasily. Laetitia flashed into the conversation with one of her swift impulses.

"And if he had been, Aggie, how could he have died better than in saving that poor woman?"

"Gilbert's life against an Irish tramp's!" said Tony Ridding scornfully. Laetitia gave him a scathing glance, but her brother Peter intervened.

"I might have been killed too!" he announced proudly. "You none of you seem to remember that."

"You young rascal!" said the tutor good-humouredly. "I have cause to remember it, at any rate. My arms ache still with catching you."

"That's just it," pursued the unabashed Peter. "You remember it, because you caught me falling off the load on your head, but Emily thinks of nothing but her fallals, and Lettice has gone off into one of her ecstasies. Nice pair of sisters for a fellow to have!"

"Lettice's ecstasies are generally over something that's worth while," said the tutor kindly, turning on his elbow to look at the girl who sat with her lips moving and shining eyes gazing into the sunset. "What is it now, Lettice?"

She glanced again at the book on her knee, and read from it in a kind of chant, oblivious of all but the one sympathetic listener:—

"Thus was he led away in a barge, wherein were three queens: the one was King Arthur's sister, Morgan le Fay; the other was the Queen of North-

galis; and the third was the Queen of the Waste Lands——,”

“I say!” Gilbert Berringer had raised his long length from the ground, and sat listening eagerly. “‘The Queen of the Waste Lands’? The Kingdom of Waste Lands—why, that’s my kingdom, I tell you!”

“My dear Gilbert, your kingdom is a regiment in the Bombay Army,” said Mr Donnellan, for Gilbert, at sixteen, was already gazetted to an ensigncy.

“No, my kingdom is an island—somewhere—with oppressed blacks waiting for me to come and hoist the British flag and bring ’em trade and civilisation and Christianity,” persisted Gilbert.

“Yes, that’s the sort of place to make money,” said Tony gloomily. “What can you do in a wretched black regiment?”

“Clive could do things,” flashed Lettice. “And who cares a pin about money? I believe you think of nothing else!” She hated Tony with a deadly hatred, because he had to some extent detached Gilbert from his old alliance with her.

“Gilbert was glad enough to borrow the money from me when he wanted to run away from school,” retorted Tony. “What would he have done without me and my money then—eh, Miss Lettice?”

“Walked home on my own two feet instead of riding off in state on the top of the coach, I imagine,” chuckled Gilbert.

“Well, Gilbert shall be Clive, and you shall be a wretched horrid old Director of the Company, always worrying him about money!” snapped Lettice, inconsequently and spitefully.

Peter stretched himself lazily. “Girls have nothing to do with kingdoms, anyhow,” he observed, with satisfaction. “They stay at home and sew, don’t they, sir?”

Mr Donnellan had a high opinion of Lettice’s mental powers, and snubbing was always good for Peter, but it would never do to encourage in his Rector’s family

anything resembling those newfangled American ideas called Women's Rights. Therefore he temporised. "Ladies may not have kingdoms of their own, my boy," he said, "but they have a great deal to do in helping men to win and keep them."

"Like a tournament," said Emily, lifting her wreath and regarding it critically with her head on one side. "Beautiful ladies looking on from the balconies."

"No!" said Gilbert suddenly, "not a bit; it's like an army. The man goes on in front and takes the risks, and the lady is like the rearguard. She don't do anything particular, but she helps to keep him safe. That's it—eh, sir?"

"Excellent, my dear fellow!" said the tutor, with a grave face. "I couldn't have put it better myself."

"Oh, brother, how beautiful!" said Agnes reverentially.

"Beautiful for you, Gilbert; but ask the lady what she thinks about it," said Lettice, with distinct coldness.

"For my part," said Peter, "if I can't get a kingdom without being bothered with girls, hanged if I'll try for one!"

The listeners on the bank above laughed involuntarily, but Theodosia followed up her laugh with a sigh—a grave, gentle sigh, such as an angel might breathe over fallen humanity—as she took her lover's arm to resume their stroll.

"I shall really have to speak to dear Papa about Lettice," she lamented. "It is time to bring her studies with Mr Donnellan to an end. She is getting terribly unpractical, and some of those books he lends her are really not quite nice for a young lady to read."

"Lettice has always been a bit of a blue," said Charles, in the judicial voice of one anxious to be fair. Theodosia shuddered.

"Nay, dear Charles—that she must not, shall not be. What has she to do with books? Do you think I could ever be happy, even with you, if I knew that

in leaving them I had abandoned dear Papa and the household and the parish to neglect—that all I have tried to do would be undone?”

“My dearest creature, you think of everything!” cried the loyal Charles adoringly. “You know full well that if the matter rested with me, I would never allow Lettice to look at a book again, rather than make you unhappy!”

CHAPTER I.

BACK TO THE ARMY AGAIN.

MRS BERRINGER sat in her drawing-room, with a worried look on her face. The subject of her distasteful musings was, as not infrequently happened, her clergyman. Yet neighbouring squires and their wives were frankly envious of the Berringers' good fortune, and Mr Berringer himself was well aware of it. What could be more convenient—he would demand of his wife when she animadverted on his close friendship with the Rector—than to have so near at hand a man who was a gentleman, a scholar, and so eminently presentable? Had she forgotten the day when the Duke of Duxford dropped in unexpectedly to lunch, and the Rector, hastily entreated to meet him, held his own in an animated political argument with such vigour and tact that the great County magnate not only desired him in the most flattering manner to drink wine with him, but asked his host jocularly afterwards what he would take for his parson, whose sermons ought to be worth listening to? To this Mrs Berringer was wont to reply that she only wished Mr Tourneur had accepted the offer of the best living in the Duke's gift, which came to him soon after, instead of remarking coolly that he knew both himself and the Duke too well to think that such close association would be wise for either of them. She felt that she could have borne the loss of the Rev. Horatio Tourneur with equanimity,

since it would have involved the removal of his family. From the moment that the handsome young clergyman, with his motherless children and the old aunt who did her best to look after them, arrived at the Rectory, Mrs Berringer—so she averred—had felt an inward conviction that they were destined to be thorns in her side.

That was twelve years ago now, and it was six years since Charles Berringer had married Theodosia Tourneur, and five since he and his father had put their heads together in a panic, and engineered the removal of the young couple from the Dower-house to a small property opportunely inherited by the Squire in the next county, lest the neighbourhood should be scandalised by the all too evident fact that Mrs Berringer and her daughter-in-law “did not speak.” Theodosia at the Rectory had been so useful and accommodating—able to be taken up and dropped, caressed and snubbed, summoned and left out in the cold, as might be convenient—that it came as a genuine shock to her mother-in-law to find Theodosia at the Dower-house a very different person. Young Mrs Berringer, the wife of the Squire’s heir, and an acknowledged beauty, declined to be patronised, and displayed a very efficient mind of her own in the management of her household. Not even a firm conviction held in common of the depravity of domestic servants—the servant question had become acute long before the forties—could bring the two ladies together, and there was no comfort for the Squire, nor peace of mind for his son, until Charles Berringer and his wife were established at a safe distance from the Hall.

Theodosia’s dastardly ingratitude was not the only crime of the Tourneur family. Mr Tourneur was responsible for introducing to the parish Edward Donnellan, who had contrived — despite all her mother’s vigilance—to steal Agnes Berringer’s heart. True, the Rector had acquiesced promptly in the necessity of Mr Donnellan’s seeking another curacy, but the mischief was done. Agnes was not in the

least like her sister-in-law Theodosia. She submitted meekly to the fiat which parted her from her lover, and neither raged nor pined, but Mrs Berringer felt certain that she would never marry any one else and expected the parting to be only temporary. Mr Tourneur could hardly be held to blame for the presumption of his curate, but Mrs Berringer could not help feeling that if he had brought up his family properly, Theodosia would have married Edward Donnellan, and not Charles. There was no comfort in the future, for Mrs Berringer might have exclaimed with Macbeth that the line would stretch out to the crack of doom, when she thought of Emily Tourneur's lovely face, and Peter's bold eyes and gallant air, in connection with her own Roger and Adelaide, and the present had its own trouble as well. The Squire, entering the room with a certain diffidence, conscious that the news he brought would be unwelcome, recognised from his wife's first words that the moment was inauspicious.

"I want to speak to you particularly, Mr Berringer"—the manner of address told its own tale. "How much longer are you going to let Gilbert hang about doing nothing, instead of making him apologise and go back to his regiment?" If his regiment was Gilbert's kingdom, it was a kingdom of which its ruler saw as little as possible. Promoted for distinguished gallantry in action, Captain Berringer—the youngest captain in the Bombay Army—was not a success in quarters. He could not be induced to take things for granted, to believe that all wisdom was embodied in the Company's Regulations, and while he was accused of unsettling his Sepoys by too great an eagerness to fraternise with them, his brother officers considered him unsociable. All his leave was spent in voyages in native coasting craft, sometimes extending as far as the Islands, and it was said that he had a larger assortment of marine acquaintances than any other man in British India. Just now he was at home under a cloud, having outstayed his

leave on the last of these excursions owing to a hurricane which had stranded him in Java. His superiors could hardly assert that he had caused the hurricane, but it was remembered against him that before starting he had declared he did not care a pin whether he was back in time or not, and his name was duly removed from the Company's roll. The Berringers possessed interest at the India House, however, and it was understood that a sufficiently abject apology, coupled with a promise of amendment, would restore him to his rank, but so far he had displayed no anxiety to offer either. His mother had no doubt whatever that she knew the reason.

"Why, indeed, my love, I was just going——" began the Squire, but his wife interrupted him.

"Pray, Mr Berringer, allow me to finish what I was saying. Mark my words, the outcome of his staying on like this can only be a marriage with Lettice Tourneur, which is the last thing we should wish for him."

"Well, indeed, my dear, I don't see why—Lettice ain't a beauty, of course, like Theodosia, but she's an agreeable homely little body, with plenty of sense."

"You gentlemen are all alike!" declared Mrs Berringer bitterly. "I say nothing about her elder sister—'beauty is deceitful,' as we all know——" the Squire murmured a correction, but it was disregarded. "What I say about Lettice is that she is *sly*."

"Oh, come now, my dear, come!"

"Sly," repeated Mrs Berringer with emphasis. "You would not notice it, of course, but to see her at a party, sitting so still and answering so properly, and to know that her eyes are all over the room, quizzing the company——"

"And pray, my dear, is the poor girl to keep her eyes on the floor, or where?"

"I expected this from you, Mr Berringer. If a distressingly plain girl happen to have eyes far too good for her face, trust you to find it out." The Squire gasped, thunderstruck. "Perhaps you will let

me say what I was intending. After our dinner-party last week, I thought I would pay a kind little visit to the Rectory, and tell old Miss Tourneur how it had gone off. As I got up to the door, I heard Lettice and her aunt laughing in the parlour—laughing so uproariously that they never heard my knock, and were quite confused when I was shown in. Miss Tourneur tried to apologise by saying that Lettice had been telling her all about the dinner-party, and it was so amusing! Lettice turned as red as fire when I asked, quite quietly, what there had been amusing about my dinner-party, and of course neither of them could say there had been anything at all. Amusing, indeed! and that little minx sitting mum all the time, and making up tales to slander the roof that sheltered her!”

“She could hardly help sitting mum, my love, since you sent her in with old Sedhurst, who is as deaf as a post, and thinks of nothing but his food. I was precious sorry for her myself, I can tell you, when I saw her bright eyes wandering about. I call her an uncommonly pleasant girl, always ready to show an interest in anything you care to talk about, and I don’t grudge her any amusement she got that evening.”

“But what business had she to find it amusing?” persisted Mrs Berringer.

“Well, I say it was precious clever of her to do it,” said the Squire. “I didn’t.”

“Oh, you!”—his wife’s tone implied that he was beyond hope.

“The fact is,” doggedly, “you meant poor Lettice to have a dull evening, Maria, and you can’t forgive her because she didn’t. There’s no nonsense about Lettice. She would have talked hunting with me, or ships with Gilbert, if you’d given her the chance, and since she couldn’t, you find fault with her for noticing that Lady Sedhurst’s paradise plume got dipped in the soup, and your turban was over your left eye.”

“I absolutely deny that it was anything of the sort!” said Mrs Berringer with spirit. “It is like

you, Mr Berringer, to bring such accusations against your wife, but I have fortunately learnt to meet them with calmness. And as to Gilbert—of course Lettice would have talked to him; that was why I put her at the other end of the table. I have no wish, even if you have, to hear everybody wondering why we let Gilbert throw himself away on a penniless girl, who has not even good looks. In the case of her sister"—it was one of the marks of Mrs Berringer's disapproval of her daughter-in-law that she declined to allow her a Christian name—"there was sufficient personal attraction to blind poor Charles to other defects, and an insinuating manner that even deceived me, but there is nothing of that kind in Lettice. Why, when I used to advise Charles's wife, before her marriage, she would listen with respect, even if she took her own way afterwards. But Lettice always keeps her eyes on my face, as if she was paying more attention to me than to what I was saying, and twice she has had the impertinence to tell me that after trying my way, Rebecca and she thought their own way was best!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed the Squire involuntarily, but his wife's frown sobered him. "If you call that sly, my dear, I must beg to differ with you."

"I call it impertinent, Mr Berringer. What I call sly is the way Lettice is setting her cap at Gilbert—trying to catch him——"

"There you are doing her an injustice, Maria. Gilbert is trying to catch her, if you like. That is what I came——"

"Wait!" commanded Mrs Berringer. She extracted a vinaigrette from her work-basket, sniffed at it delicately, and assumed the reproachful expression of a martyr suffering for a cause in which he has ceased to believe. "Now let me know the worst."

"Gilbert has been speaking to me to-day——" the Squire had watched his wife's preparations nervously. "He has no intention of returning to the army, and he didn't attempt to hide that his mind is still running on those islands he talks about——"

"And the blacks!" ejaculated Mrs Berringer contemptuously.

"Well, you know he won't have 'em called blacks. But seeing we were so disinclined to let him try his fortune out there, he was prepared to stay at home if I would hand over to him Wallingbury Rings, and let him work it."

"That farm on the Downs, where all those wretched half-heathen people live? And you can calmly contemplate your son's settling down as a common farmer?"

"Not at all, my dear. A very uncommon farmer, I assure you—a mixture of magistrate, missionary, farmer, and doctor, as far as I can make out."

"With Lettice to help him, of course?"

"I gathered that the plan would lose its attractions without her. He proposes to treat the place as an island, I understand, and set to work to civilise the people, who certainly need it."

"I always said Gilbert took after the Berringers," said Gilbert's mother bitterly. "There has never been any madness in my family."

"Nor in mine," said the Squire sharply. "But the boy has always been different from the rest."

"Yes, but what *business* has he to be different?" was Mrs Berringer's despairing cry. It was the old problem of the ugly duckling, the one odd member of a worthy and commonplace family, sprung from two absolutely worthy and commonplace people, but the fable was not yet known in England for the poor lady's comfort. "Why should he be always thinking about islands and savages instead of his duties?"

"Well, my love, he pointed out to me very sensibly that India was not his choice. He was pitchforked into the army, as he said, because your uncle gave him a nomination, and he has felt like a fish out of water from the beginning. I fear we should have done better to send him to Australia."

But Mrs Berringer had recovered herself after her momentary dismay. "These regrets are childish, Mr

Berringer. We have done our best for Gilbert, and he must abide by it. Who ever heard of a young man choosing his own career? What next, I should like to know? You must be very firm with him, tell him plainly that all this nonsense—whether about islands or Wallingbury Rings—is to cease, and that unless he goes up to London and apologises to the Board at once, you will cut off his allowance. Then he will go back to his duty, and we shall hear no more of such absurdity. Put your foot down, I beg of you.”

“Then is Lettice to go back with him?” The Squire had honestly done his best both for Lettice and his son, but the habit of years was prevailing, and as soon as his wife bestirred herself to take command he came to heel with a docility that spoke well for his training. Mrs Berringer rose majestic.

“Most certainly not. I wonder at you, Mr Berringer, for thinking of such a thing. If Gilbert hamper himself with a wife now, it will mean his ruin. And a poor plain penniless girl, who won't say a word to turn him from his silly notions—why, I believe she sympathises with them! What Gilbert needs is a woman of strong character, who will influence him for his good. Lettice will never make any noise in the world, you mark my words, and Gilbert's wife must be one who will keep him well in hand and advance his career.”

“Without consulting his feelings,” murmured the Squire, but his wife was absorbed in the joys of prophecy, and did not heed him. It was not for her to look forward three-quarters of a century, and see pilgrims from the uttermost parts of the earth thronging to Sniddingly Rectory because it had been the abode of Laetitia Tourneur. Nor would she have thought it possible for the better informed of these, leaving the Rectory reluctantly, to glance in passing at the Hall and remark casually, “Ah, and I see Berringer was born here—Gilbert Berringer, you know. Monument in the church, the guide-book says.”

"I have nothing against Lettice in her place," she said graciously, "but that place is at the Rectory. She is cut out for an old maid, and I daresay she will be a great comfort to her father, who will soon be getting elderly. She has no right to think of leaving him, and I'm sure he will be the first to say so. He has taken a dislike to Gilbert, too, for some reason—he called him a gentlemanly pirate the other day. Really I think clergymen have no right to exercise their wit on the families of their principal parishioners—but it will be convenient in this case. I must speak to him seriously about Lettice——"

"My dear, let me beg of you to do nothing of the kind." The Squire was genuinely alarmed, for a serious encounter between his wife and Mr Tourneur was likely to end in the fashion of the historic duel of the Kilkenny Cats. "I shall be passing the Rectory in a moment, and I will speak to Tourneur myself. I shall tell him that we think it would be unwise for Gilbert to hamper himself with a wife at present, but that if he is in the same mind at his next furlough, we shall have no objection to the engagement."

"You water things down so sadly!" lamented his wife. "Why can't you say plainly that we don't wish them to marry? It would save an enormous amount of trouble in the long-run. But you are always thinking of sparing other people's feelings!"

"At present I am thinking that if Gilbert has made up his mind to marry Lettice, he will probably do it whether we wish it or not," said the Squire humorously. "But I quite agree with you that he ought to go back to the regiment for a while, and establish a character for steadiness before he takes such a responsibility upon him, and I would say the same to Lettice herself. But she would have the sense to see it without being told, or I'm much mistaken."

CHAPTER II.

THUS FAR, AND NO FARTHER.

LETTICE was returning from carrying a jar of broth to a sick woman in an outlying hamlet, and Gilbert had joined her for the walk home. The encounter was not unprecedented—indeed, it might almost have been imagined that Gilbert had been accustomed to watch her go out, and calculating nicely the time required for administering material and spiritual comfort to the sufferer, to stroll past the cottage at precisely the right moment. He was not in a very cheerful mood to-day, and after possessing himself of Lettice's basket, walked by her side for a moment actually in silence. Then, as they passed the cart-track leading to Wallingbury Rings, hidden in the Down, he unbent so far as to utter a malediction on the farm and its inhabitants, and express the hope that Lettice never went in that direction alone. Assured promptly that she was much too frightened, he frowned, seemed about to speak, and pulled himself up sharply. Knowing these signs, Lettice gathered that he had been having a disagreeable interview with his father—ending probably in the presentation of unpleasant alternatives—though what Wallingbury Rings had to do with it she could not divine. But she knew how to clear Gilbert's frowning brow, and in a moment after she had switched the conversation deftly round to the East Indian Islands, he was striding along in perfect

content, swinging the basket so vigorously that it was well there was no broth in the jar. Lettice smiled her quiet little smile as she watched him—for which she had excellent opportunity, since in the ardour of his monologue he was apt to walk faster and faster until he was well ahead of her. She and her father did not often agree in their estimate of Gilbert, but that “gentlemanly pirate” was inimitable. A short blue coat and wide white trousers, a loosely flowing tie and a straw boating-hat—in those days adorned with jaunty streamers at the side—made the Squire’s second son a well-known figure all over the district, and offered a piquant contrast to the stiff spick-and-span uniform he ought to have been wearing. Lettice, in her straw bonnet and faded Paisley shawl, looked absurdly dowdy beside him, as she put in a murmur of assent or a brief dry comment when an imperative pause called for it. On the subject on which he was now embarked, Gilbert’s eloquence was inexhaustible. The supineness of England in the Eastern Seas, the iniquity of the Dutch in seeking to exclude all other nations from the trade of the Islands, the unhappy state of the natives—despoiled by pirates, plundered by their rulers, and debarred by Holland from all chance of bettering their condition—on these he would discourse indefinitely. His one idea was to break the jealous monopoly of the Dutch, and open up the archipelago to trade, to a purer political life, to Christianity—for he was curiously Elizabethan in the mingling of his motives and the frankness with which he avowed it. Money was the difficulty—money to fit out an expedition which should keep the Dutch in their place, and restore to England the position which her own slackness had let slip. And Lettice, to whom his allowance sounded unimaginable wealth, sympathised gravely while he spoke of thousands with less respect than she would have mentioned sixpences. She had rarely owned a shilling in her life; if she or her sisters needed a collar or a pair of shoelaces, application must be made to their father.

"Such an opportunity can never recur!" cried Gilbert. "This chance of getting into Bandeir—Prince Yusuf's friendliness—what more could we ask? He will welcome us as traders, and joyfully accept our help against the pirates and his own disloyal chiefs. We should establish a centre of British influence, and open up the whole island with a free port at Bandeir. Ten thousand pounds would do it—at first, I mean——"

"It sounds rather expensive," said a meek voice from the rear. He faced round, and discovered Lettice walking sedately some three yards behind him, his enthusiasm having carried him on in advance. He laughed good-humouredly, and returned.

"Bringing me down to earth, as usual!" he said. "What should I do without you to keep me out of the clouds? But it ain't expensive, my dear girl, that's just it. You take my word, it's most absurdly cheap. To keep the archipelago open for England, make her a free gift of trade worth many thousands a year—which the Dutch, without a shadow of right to it, are clawing into their dirty grip—how's that, eh?"

"England ought to be grateful," allowed Lettice. "But who is going to find the money?"

"Hanged if I know! At least, if I could only put down my share, I know the other fellows to do it."

"You have a very patriotic set of friends," said Lettice drily.

"Oh, well, of course, they would expect to make their living out of it, and perhaps a moderate profit. More I should not allow. We are going into this for the benefit of Bandeir, not our own."

"But suppose they prefer to think of themselves and their own profit," persisted Lettice relentlessly. "They can out-vote you if you quarrel."

Gilbert drew himself up. "I am the head of the expedition," he said. "Ridding and Sansom come into it under me."

"Then it is Tony!" said Lettice anxiously. "I was afraid it must be, when he told Papa he thought he should sell the practice, and not settle down here at all. But if you think he is going to give free gifts to England——!"

"You have always misjudged Tony," said Gilbert, with dignity. "He may have got it into his head that he can write epics, but he is a jolly good fellow, and always ready to back a friend with all the money he's got, at a pinch."

"Provided the security is good," said Lettice smartly. "Oh, Gilbert, you are not a bit altered since Tony used to lend you halfpence at school, when you had given away all your pocket-money, and always got pennies back. You know you found it out yourself."

"And I thrashed him well when I did find out, you know that. So I don't think that old score ought to be brought up against him."

"But it shows what he is. Did you ever know him lose by anything in the end? And Mr Sansom is the man at Singapore who has a ship, I suppose? Is he the same kind of person? But it's no use asking you. If he said he was an angel, you would believe him."

"Really, Lettice!" said Gilbert angrily. Then he squared his shoulders, and looked—so Lettice thought—very noble and determined. "My dear little Lettice"—he spoke very kindly—"I think you forget that I have seen a good deal of the world by this time, and am not likely to make mistakes in the people I have to do with. Sansom is a business man, and our dealings will be on a business footing. But he fully understands that in accepting my leadership, he is taking service under a gentleman, and will behave himself accordingly."

"I haven't a doubt that he fully understands you, Gilbert, and has every intention of taking advantage of you."

"This is nothing but peevishness, Lettice," he said

reprovingly. "How can you speak so unjustly of a man you have never even seen, for whom I, who have seen him, can vouch?"

Lettice heaved an impatient sigh. She knew, though she could not have said it, any more than Gilbert would have believed it, that she, who had seen only the village and the Clergy Daughters' School, was a better judge of character than he, who had travelled half round the globe. "A gentleman is always at a disadvantage in these cases," she said, "just because it would never enter his head that the other people won't deal fairly with him."

"Pray don't think I am going alone into your imaginary den of thieves. There will be other white men—subordinates. Why, Peter will come if I hold up a finger."

"Oh, but you mustn't make Peter abandon his ship," said Lettice anxiously. "It was so good of Papa to let him be a sailor instead of insisting on his going to College—we never expected it—and he must stick to the sea now."

"If Peter comes with me, it will be as master or mate of my vessel, with proper pay. I don't know why you should take it into your head that I intend to lure him from his employment and leave him stranded."

"I don't know why either. Only, you know, your schemes are so big, Gilbert, and you have no money behind you. I don't want to be peevish—you ought to know that—but I don't see how you are going to set to work."

"Nor do I," confessed Gilbert frankly. "But the thing must be done—it must. So the money will have to be found somehow."

"You don't think it might be better——" began Lettice with diffidence. There was a kind of treachery in even suggesting that he might do better to return to his regiment, and by dint of savings and prize-money attempt to accumulate a capital for his enterprise. But before the distasteful words could

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pass her lips, her attention was diverted. "Why, there's some one in the Dingle!" she cried. There was a right of way through the hollow, but Berringers and Tourneurs were as one in insisting that the place was their private property, and the duty of wayfarers to pass straight through. "Oh, it's Papa!" she added, as they came into clearer view of the figure seated on a fallen tree-trunk. "How droll! Has he ever been here in his life before?"

Mr Tourneur looked up, with something of cool criticism in his eye, at his daughter and Gilbert as they came down the slope towards him. He was a study in black and white as he sat there, for his French descent showed itself in the pallor of his complexion and the jet-black of hair and whiskers. Not even the swallow-tail coat and voluminous white neckcloth which were the distinguishing clerical dress of the day could disguise the fact that he was still an exceedingly handsome man both in face and figure. He sat watching silently, his stick beside him, his tall hat balanced on his knee, while Gilbert and Lettice approached. His attitude gave him in some way the aspect of a judge about to pass sentence on a pair of culprits, and Lettice felt that she must break the silence.

"We did not expect to find you here, Papa."

"Probably not, my dear." He spoke with the delicately precise utterance which distinguished him from his jolly, hearty, slip-shod neighbours. "I fancied it might be advisable to escort you back from this" — a distinct pause — "this farewell excursion."

"I assure you, sir," said Gilbert hurriedly, "I am not leaving home yet."

"No? But Lettice is. She will return to school for a time. The junior governess is ill, and the head-mistress has asked that Lettice may take her place."

Lettice received the sentence of banishment in dumb amaze, but Gilbert read between the lines. "And when will she come back, sir?" he demanded.

"When you have returned to duty, my dear Gilbert," said Mr Tourneur carelessly, examining a microscopic scratch on the silver head of his cane.

"Pray, sir, are you sending Lettice away on my account?"

"It is a little difficult to say. On yours, perhaps; on her own, certainly. You see, these walks of yours arouse a certain amount of interest in the parish—awaking expectations which are hardly likely to be fulfilled."

"Papa!" cried Lettice, her face aflame. Gilbert and she had belonged to one another so completely for so long that a definite engagement had not even occurred to her as necessary. Presumably they would be married some day, when Gilbert had time to spare from his empire-building schemes. Could it be possible that her father wished to spur him on? She blushed more for him than for herself. Gilbert took the hand she tried to snatch from him, and held it with a reverent gentleness.

"Nay, Lettice; it is for me to speak. Do the people say that Lettice and I are 'keeping company,' sir?" he spoke almost gaily. "Well, they are quite right. I have never even thought of any one else, nor has she, I believe. I hope we may look forward to your approval of our marriage?"

"You interest me deeply, Gilbert," said Mr Tourneur, gay in his turn. "You have recently acquired the means to support a wife?"

Gilbert would have dropped Lettice's hand now, but in this moment of his humiliation she held fast to him. "Why, indeed, sir—I give you my word—precious poor look-out—go out and work like a nigger——" he stammered pitifully. Mr Tourneur waved a compassionate hand.

"Pray, Gilbert—pray, my dear fellow—don't embarrass yourself so cruelly. I was curious—unjustifiably curious, I admit—as to your resources, but the question does not arise. Lettice is not free to marry."

"If I gave up everything, and settled down in England, sir?"

"*More* changes of plan? Really, my dear Gilbert, your versatility is wonderful, and ought to ensure you success when you have hit upon a line in which you can turn it to account. But you may put Lettice out of your head altogether. She has duties at home, and you—well, if you will permit me to recommend you to cultivate the steadiness of purpose to which you are at present a stranger, you will find that a task that will fully occupy your energies."

"But I don't understand, sir. Duties? What duties has Lettice?"

"To show piety at home and requite her father, young man. I have stinted myself to provide her with a good education, in the confidence that she would employ it for the benefit of her family and this parish. Her sister is married, her aunt is advanced in years. The Rectory, the schools, the female population of the village, all show the need of such influence as a young woman in her position may legitimately exercise. Various branches of work for the benefit of her sex have languished, lacking a leader. Working in due subordination to myself, she will, I am convinced, render them valuable aid."

"You put the parish above Lettice's happiness, then?"

"Quite the contrary, I assure you. Were Lettice capable of finding happiness in disregard of her clear duty, I would bid her depart without a pang. But I think better of her. She will choose the correct path, and I look to see you do the same, laying aside these vague schemes of self-aggrandisement"—Lettice and Gilbert both flushed hotly—"which so far have only operated to your detriment in the pursuit of your profession."

Gilbert spoke slowly. "And suppose I do return to my regiment, sir—and work hard and all that sort of thing—do you mean you will let us be engaged?"

"I am not unreasonable, I trust. In a few years'

time, if Lettice be free, and you have attained a competency, I will offer no opposition to your desires, but for the present I refuse to hear of such a thing. I have observed lately that you exercise a most unsettling influence upon her, Gilbert, as she, I fear, does on you. I understand that your worthy parents have been much distressed by it—quite unnecessarily, for had they consulted me I could have assured them I had determined on the steps to be taken. For the present there is to be no word or thought of an engagement between you.”

“You can’t control our thoughts, Papa!” cried Lettice, with magnificent courage. Her father misunderstood her.

“Do I hear you aright, Lettice? A well brought up young Christian lady tells me she cannot control her thoughts? I am ashamed of you!”

“Oh, Papa, that is not just! I said you couldn’t keep us from thinking of one another. How could we help it?”

“I trust for your own sake that you will help it, my dear, since Gilbert’s thoughts will undoubtedly soon turn to other objects. But I apologise for my misconception.”

“It’s Gilbert——” began Lettice, on the verge of tears. “How can you be so unfair——?”

“Nay, Lettice, I have deserved it,” said Gilbert heavily, in what she knew as his “irrevocable” voice. “What else could your father think, when he saw me willing to allow you to be used as a bribe to draw me aside from the work to which I am called? I bow to your decision, sir. Perhaps I ought to thank you for showing me the right path, but it is difficult at present.”

“No thanks needed!” said Mr Tourneur, with as near an approach to jocularitas as his nature permitted. “They will come later, when you are a Brigadier-General with innumerable medals, and no one will be more pleased to see you than I.”

“That will never be,” said Gilbert, and Lettice

glanced at him sharply. "But let me make one request of you, sir. It is unnecessary to banish poor Lettice from home. I am leaving to-morrow by the early coach."

"Now this is what I should have expected of you, Gilbert!" Mr Tourneur wrung his hand with hearty congratulation. "You are bearing your disappointment in the right spirit, and I have more hope of you than I have had for months. Come, my dear, give Gilbert your hand, and let us be going."

With an effort, Lettice stretched out a cold and shaking hand, and just touched Gilbert's, in which there was no response. She had known it, from his voice and the look in his eyes, but the realisation was no less bitter. Mechanically she took her father's arm, and Mr Tourneur made polite conversation as they left Gilbert solitary in the Dingle. Presently her lack of response seemed to strike him.

"Perhaps it is too much to expect gratitude," he observed dispassionately, "but I think I deserve a bare acknowledgment of my success from you, my dear. I have made your lover—a charming fellow, very, but unstable as water—into a man for you."

"I wish I knew what you had done, Papa!" cried Lettice. Her voice thrilled with pain, and her brows were drawn together. "I don't know what he means to do."

"You fear his doing something desperate? My dear Lettice, young men's hearts are a good deal tougher than young ladies are apt to imagine."

"Oh, you don't know! I know him so well——"

"Ain't you slightly inclined to overestimate the effect of your—charms, my dear?" Lettice was never allowed to forget that she was the plain member of a handsome family, but this time the reminder did not have its usual cold douche effect. She knew the mystical streak in Gilbert which inclined him to watch for "signs" in his daily life, and she recognised that he had accepted her father's attitude just now as a sign. But in which direction did it point? "No

doubt it is sacrilege to suggest that his parents and I may possibly know nearly as much of his character as you do," her father went on, "but we will, if you please, accept it provisionally as true in future."

"Oh, what does it signify what you say about me, Papa?" she demanded wearily. "You know I would never marry Gilbert as long as I am wanted at home, but what have you done to Gilbert? He seemed to change—all in a moment."

"Would it be presumption in me to suggest that the change was an improvement, my dear?"

"But you don't know—nor do I—what the change means. You think he is merely fickle. But he has always felt that he had a kind of call—a mission——"

"We all think when we are young that we have a mission to reform the world. I thought so myself once."

"And when you are old?" sharply.

"Now I am—old, my dear Lettice," with an expressive pause before the adjective, "I realise that the young think they have a mission to reform me. Oh, pray don't apologise. It is most natural, I am sure. When you and Gilbert are my age, you will feel as I do."

"But the years between!" cried Lettice, a flood of passionate pain sweeping away for one brief moment her usual awe of her father. "Oh, you might have let us write, Papa! Never to hear from him——!"

"Do I hear you questioning my decision, Lettice?" Mr Tourneur faced round and looked at his daughter, and at the glance her momentary courage oozed away. It was as though he saw it go, for he laughed. "To tell the truth, my dear, I did not think your feelings were very deeply involved. All your concern seemed to be for Gilbert."

"And so it is—it ought to be," she persisted desperately. "Gilbert is—he is everything to me, Papa."

"I am more than sorry to hear it, my dear. Nevertheless, I believe you to be so firmly grounded in the principles of duty and self-control in which you

have been brought up, as neither to require sympathy nor even to desire it."

Lettice's spasm of self-assertion was over. Her father's tone had implied, she thought as she walked on by his side, something of a compliment, yet even at this moment she could not help seeing that by it he disclaimed in advance any necessity of making allowances, or showing special tenderness to her feelings, in the years to come. She had not expected the tenderness, but there seemed something a little inhuman in Mr Tourneur's safeguarding his sympathies so carefully. It meant that he would absolutely ignore the fact of her having any interest in Gilbert, she knew, and the prospect looked bleak enough. With her outward ears she heard her father still speaking approvingly of Gilbert's acceptance of the situation, prophesying success for him in the army, and showing conclusively that gratitude, rather than resentment, was the due of the person to whom this desirable result was owing, but her heart turned from him to poor old Aunt Sophy, watching with anxious eyes from the parlour window as they reached the Rectory. The old lady stood as much in awe of her nephew as did his daughters, and it was not till bedtime, when he was safely retired to his study, that she ventured into Lettice's room, a grotesque night-capped figure carrying a flat candlestick, to weep over the girl, and confess her secret fear that Mr Tourneur's action was due to an indiscretion of hers. She had read a marriage in the tea-leaves at the bottom of her cup, and had incautiously exclaimed that no doubt it meant Gilbert and Lettice—and could her darling girl ever forgive her if she had banned where she hoped to bless? Lettice had to put forth all her powers to comfort her, and escorted her to bed at last quite cheerful in the thought of a returning Gilbert, plastered with medals, coming to claim his bride. But Lettice herself doubted very gravely whether Gilbert would ever draw sword in the Indian Army again.

She would have known her prevision justified had she seen him when he caught the London coach the next morning. His destination was not the India House or Cannon Row, but a certain "cottage orné" in still rural Kensington, where his grandmother lived. He could not have inherited his troublesome disposition from her, for she was only his grandfather's second wife, but she had always shown him favour, discerning in him the one exception to the maddening ordinariness of the Berringers. Her love of the unexpected ought to have been gratified this evening, when her step-grandson, with a distracted aspect, appeared before her, and boldly asked her to lend him four thousand pounds to finance his share of an expedition to the Eastern Archipelago. Mrs Berringer, Senior, was a woman of business, and her shrewd questions gave Gilbert pause, for they echoed Lettice's objections of yesterday. He sat awkwardly silent while the old lady summed up.

"A third share is absurd, if you are to lead the enterprise. You must have the controlling interest, if you are not to be outvoted by your partners, of whose good faith you ought to be doubtful if you ain't. The temptation you propose putting in their way would make nine out of ten men rogues. Seven thousand pounds, and not a penny less, should be your stake in the expedition."

Her enquiring glance drew doleful confession from Gilbert. "And I can't lay my hands upon seven thousand pence, ma'am."

"Yet you feel strongly moved to embark upon the undertaking?"

"It has been my dream for years, ma'am. There's no one else to do it, and I know that those poor people could be made happy and prosperous with just government and a decent system of trade. I have made friends with one of the native chiefs — the King's eldest son, who will co-operate with me and give me a free hand. When I heard it was all up with the army it seemed as if the way was clear without

opposing my parents, and since then I have thought of little else but Jhalábor. Just lately, I confess, I have wavered. There seemed a chance of—something else that I wanted very much, and I turned aside. I offered—Heaven forgive me!—to give up the plan, but it was not permitted. The—other thing—was refused, and I was brought back into the path. So I knew I had been wrong, and at the same moment the thought of you came into my mind, and I decided to see if you would help.”

“You are a very extraordinary young man,” said the old lady grimly, and gazed at Gilbert as though her searching eyes would pierce his very soul. “And I am an unmitigated fool!” she added, with alarming resolution.

“May I hope that means you are willing to back the venture, ma’am?” he asked, with the smile that made his irregular features charming, though his voice trembled a little.

“It does. It means more than that. I have always been sadly foolish about you, Gilbert, ever since you were a little urchin in a plaid frock and jean trousers, and offered to fight your dear grand-papa because he pretended to box my ears. When I have been able to put anything aside, it has been for you, and you had better have it now instead of longing for my death. Here are the particulars.”

She passed him a little account-book, and he glanced through it quickly, then looked up astonished. “You are too good, ma’am. I could not accept so generous, so magnificent a gift.”

“But your plan will swallow it up without a qualm,” she retorted sharply. “I will see my man of business at once about making it over to you. Seven thousand three hundred, ain’t it?—you will be glad of what is left for your personal expenses. Not that I attach any conditions to the money. You can take it and buy your step if you like to go back to the Army—but you have no purchase in the Company’s service, have you?”

—or improve your circumstances in any way you please. Or you can carry out your crazy plan, whichever you choose. Which is it to be?”

“There can be no doubt, ma’am. Had this happened yesterday, I might have hesitated, but to-day there is but one possible course. I go east.”

CHAPTER III.

GILBERT GOES EAST.

THE way was clear now, and Gilbert took it without hesitation. The India Board looked in vain for the returning prodigal, and commercial and scientific circles were pleasantly agitated by the news that a British exploring expedition was about to proceed to the great island of Jhalábor. The moment was propitious for exciting interest, since the early Victorian age saw a miniature Elizabethan revival of enterprise and discovery, consequent upon the realisation of the great uncharted spaces of the world, and the possession of the new ally, steam, with which to conquer them. Gilbert might have enlisted what support he chose, both personal and material, but he held fast to his original plan of a small body under his own absolute control. His henchman Tony Ridding received a sharp rebuke for the "chattering" by which the matter had become public at all, when his leader had intended to disclose his intentions only to the Royal Geographical Society, whose assistance he needed in respect to the problems to be solved. As things were, it was variously rumoured that Captain Berringer had discovered a diamond mine or had obtained credible information of a pirate's hoard, and people's minds were all agog on the subject. Tony promised amendment, but could not resist enhancing his own importance by dropping mysterious hints as to the results to be expected from the expedition, whereupon his leader descended upon him smartly, and packed him off to

Southampton to oversee the fitting-out of the ship which was to bear Cæsar and his fortunes. For Gilbert, in spite of his headstrong disposition, was not so obstinate as to refuse to profit by a warning repeated sufficiently often, and when the raised eyebrows of the experts among whom he moved hinted something more than doubt as to the *bona fides* of his intended partner, Mr Sansom of Singapore, he remembered that his grandmother and Lettice had also remarked on the unwisdom of leaving himself too much in that gentleman's hands. Therefore the solitary ship that bore the Sansom flag was relegated to the background of Gilbert's mind, and he bought a vessel of his own, with auxiliary steam-power, to act as handmaid to the expedition. The capable hands to whom her equipment was entrusted needed no oversight from Tony Ridding, but at least he would have less temptation to talk at Southampton than in London.

True to the stern conception of his duty awakened in him by the realisation that he had nearly failed in it, Gilbert did not return to Sniddingly before sailing. His parents were summoned to London to bid him farewell at his hotel, and obeyed, Mrs Berringer very much under protest. She was quite sure that her husband had mismanaged the whole affair shockingly, and that if it had been left to her, Gilbert would by this time be halfway to India again. Mr Tourneur and Lettice came in for their share of blame, though why it would be difficult to say. But in Gilbert's presence his mother's reproaches died upon her lips. There was a change in him—the change which Lettice had divined at the moment of its occurrence—and he seemed to stand remote from the parents of whom he was now independent. He declined to fix any date for his return. He had given his life to his enterprise, he said, and England might see him again in five years or in twenty, or not at all. Even Mrs Berringer's fluency was not proof against his cold aloofness, and the Squire, who took an hour's walk with his son, and succeeded to some extent in penetrating his state of

mind, knew better than to attempt to make his wife a sharer in his knowledge. He confided to Agnes afterwards that he believed the boy was really suffering acutely in thus turning his back upon home and the hopes of years, but hid the pain stoically, convinced that it was a fit punishment for the passing impulse to take his hand from the plough. Agnes duly conveyed the news to Lettice, that she might find what poor comfort she could.

The expedition was not a large one when it finally sailed from Southampton. Gilbert himself was in charge of the surveying and map-making arrangements, the doctor of those for enquiring into the languages and customs of the natives, and Tony—because there was no one else to do it—of the commissariat, while there was a naturalist to observe the vegetation and animals of the country traversed, and at Singapore Mr Sansom was to be picked up as commercial expert—though the term was not yet known. There had been no opportunity of securing the services of Peter Tourneur, whose ship was on a voyage to Australia, and the command of the *Golden Helen* was entrusted to Captain Briggs, a weather-beaten ancient mariner recommended by the former owners. It was a curiously composed party which thus embarked on the quest of tracing the course of the Bandeir River and opening up the interior of Jhalábor, but Gilbert had no qualms. His mind was at rest now, since he was obeying the vision he had beheld, and nothing could persuade him that failure—even in the more remote and loftier aims which were not imparted to the Royal Geographical Society—was possible. With a coolness which aroused the indignation, not unmixed with amusement, of his associates, he made it clear from the outset that the sole power was his, reprimanded and fined Tony and the naturalist for a quarrel which led to a rough-and-tumble fight and the destruction of property, and asserted his authority even over Captain Briggs, who had been inclined to regard with contemptuous irritation the “young swell

of a soger officer" who chose to consider himself as the figurehead of affairs. Long before Singapore was reached, an armed neutrality reigned in the cabin. Behind Gilbert, who cared nothing whether he was supported or not, was the somewhat hesitating support of Tony and the reluctant adherence of Captain Briggs, while the surgeon and the naturalist had struck up an opposition alliance. Both parties—with the exception of Gilbert—looked forward eagerly to Mr Sansom's arrival on board as promising a recruit for their ranks.

It seemed, however, that Mr Sansom was in no hurry to join the expedition. His own dishevelled-looking schooner was lying in the harbour when the *Golden Helen* arrived, and it was clear that he took it as a personal insult that she had not been employed as Gilbert had first intended. His manner was extremely stiff when Gilbert and Tony called upon him at his office, for an office he possessed, though the regular merchants of the place looked upon him as a mere amateur. They found him useful sometimes, when a partner was needed for a speculative or even doubtful venture, but they devoutly believed that he had "done something" at home, and that his family had packed him off to the East with a certain amount of money to get rid of him. Mr Sansom was well aware of the light in which he was regarded, and the consciousness lent a certain pathos to the sternness of his mien. Autocratic as Gilbert was, it was absolutely intolerable to him to feel that any human creature was justly aggrieved by any action of his, and he was prepared to do all in his power to remove the rankling sense of ill usage.

"It ain't for me to complain," said Mr Sansom, with lofty gloom, as he summoned a Chinese boy to set long tumblers before his guests in the shaded office. "Even when a gentleman on whom I would have staked my last guinea goes back on his bargain with me—well, it's precious hard luck, but you won't find me complain."

"You can hardly call it a bargain," said Gilbert

earnestly, refusing the decoction offered him. "The suggestion that your vessel should be used was your own, and I consented to consider it provided no better plan offered itself. When I found I had the means of buying a steamship, you couldn't expect me to place your disappointment above the success of the expedition."

"There it is again!" cried Mr Sansom, waiving the point with bewildering celerity. "What's all this talk of an expedition mean? Here I understood you and me were going to make a trading voyage in a quiet way, you visiting your friends and me keeping my eyes open for what might be picked up, and now you come along with letters from the Royal Geographical Society"—with immense contempt—"and a lot of other fellows to share the pickings and carry tales of what don't concern 'em——"

"I fail to understand you, Mr Sansom." The coldness of the tone brought Sansom down from his high horse at once. "There was never any question of a journey for trading purposes alone. The persons under my command have no pecuniary share in the expedition. I have provided three-fifths of the money, my friend Mr Ridding here one-fifth, and the other fifth is at your disposal if you care to take it up."

"That's a fine offer to make to a man who has kept his schooner idle that she might be ready for you!" said Sansom bitterly. "But I suppose I must accept it, and trust to make up the loss by the profits—if there are any. It's well to be you swells, with your thousands to chuck away on your fancies!"

"We have neither of us money to throw away," said Gilbert coldly. "Nor is this expedition a fancy. It is a considered project with which you led me to believe you were in full sympathy. I have been building on your help in dealing with the islanders, but sooner than take a discontented man with me, I will manage with my own slight knowledge of the people and their languages."

"Hasty, as usual!" said Mr Sansom, who had

imbibed courage with two glasses of the enticing mixture. "I never said I wouldn't go. You pull a fellow up so uncommon short, Berringer—Captain," he added hastily. "You tell me what you want me to do, and though I mayn't be able to pay cash down, as things are, yet I'll do my part somehow."

"You might take in hand the victualling of the expedition," said Gilbert reluctantly, for he had found the man's manner very offensive. "Our stores need replenishing after the voyage out—my friend here will tell you the details. Then there are the trade-goods and our supplies all the time we are in Jhalábor. If you like to treat your schooner as a relief depot, and give orders for her to visit Bandeir with fresh stores every three months or so, I have no objection."

"Now that's business!" said Mr Sansom, with marked joviality, rising to refill the glasses. "What, Captain, you've touched nothing? Now that's the worst of you high-toned fellows—no sociability about you! Your friend ain't your sort, I can see. Say when, Mr Ridding. And what's our programme, Captain?"

"To go up to Bandeir and have a good talk with Prince Yusuf and his nobles—find out which of his neighbours he is in particular trouble with just now. Then to go on up the river and talk to the tribes—make peace with 'em on his behalf. His own men are frightened to death to go—he told me so. While the negotiations are going on, you and Ridding here and the other fellows take stock of the possibilities of the country for trading, or even colonisation."

"Or mining!" cried Sansom, with gleaming eyes. "There's gold and antimony in the hills, and diamonds in some of the smaller streams, or I'm a Dutchman!"

"That will be for you to ascertain. Then we come down to Bandeir, having made Yusuf's rear secure, and take measures to deal with the pirate-tribes on the coast. In my opinion they'll need a lesson before they will leave off harrying the Bandeir people, but we shall see. By that time we shall have established a claim

on the gratitude of the Bandeireans, and the concession Yusuf has already offered me for a trading-station will be well deserved. With him and the people at our back, we shall be able to snap our fingers at the Dutch, who will probably be making themselves disagreeable by that time."

"Most probably," agreed Sansom drily. "But if ever any one deserved a monopoly of trade, you will, Captain, when you've done all that for Bandeir. But the monopoly will be well worth it, if we all had to double what we are putting into it."

"You mistake me," said Gilbert, controlling himself with difficulty. "There will be no monopoly. Nothing would induce me to accept one. A free port, on the model of this, is what I hope to establish, in which English and Dutch—unless they exclude us from their ports—and Malays can trade on equal terms. Nor will I hear of our making any excessive profit. A moderate return on the sums invested, with a due consideration of the risk—that's all we shall take. Any additional profits will go to improving the port or otherwise ameliorating the lot of the people. We ain't here to make money."

"Hear him!" cried Sansom sportively. "Listen to our noble Captain, that we all obey! 'Ain't here to make money'? No, of course not. To chuck it away with both hands, that's more likely! Have your way, sir, have your way. Your friend here and I won't bring it up against you when you come down to earth. We are mere ordinary business men, who can't talk fine language about ameliorating the lot of the people, but there's no green in our eye. We'll back you up, and help you to fall soft when you do fall."

Gilbert went out of the office with his head held high. He had failed to perceive hitherto how antagonistic were Sansom's aims to his own, nor had he realised the essential commonness of the man's nature, which seemed now to rasp him at every turn. But the recollection of the way in which difficulties had been removed, and the path opened before him, restored his

cheerfulness. He could not be intended to fail now, either for lack of Sansom's help as interpreter, or by reason of Sansom's devotion to material gain. Tony had the same extraordinary twist in his character, and Tony sang small as soon as ever his friend put his foot down. Sansom would soon learn to be content with the moderate return which was all that Gilbert intended to allow—or if he was not content, he would learn who was the leader of the expedition. The impracticable vein in Gilbert, which his mother and Lettice knew so well, came out strongly in his dealings with money. He had the contempt for it only possible to the man who has never known its lack, and he expected others to feel the same whose life had been one long struggle for it. When they declined to do so, his authority came into play.

The stores and trade-goods which represented the first instalment of Mr Sansom's share in the expedition came on board with a celerity which rather surprised Singapore generally. It was quite a small place at this time, with a friendly and guileless interest in its neighbours' affairs, and it was quite certain that he had neither the ready money nor the credit for such purchases at his command. A loan which would give the lender the first claim on his future profits, or even a definite mortgage of his share in the venture, were the expedients generally suggested, but naturally no one thought it necessary to inform Gilbert, who was not a favourite in mercantile circles, owing to his high and mighty manner and what was considered the unpractical character of his views.

The voyage to Jhalábor passed without incident, unless it can be called an incident that Mr Sansom was speedily hail-fellow-well-met with both the opposed parties in the cuddy of the *Golden Helen*. He was so obviously the practical man, as contrasted with the idealism of their leader, that they soon accepted his utterances on people and politics in the islands as gospel, and he was so friendly and expansive that it was impossible to sit sulkily aside and shun his

agreeable company. Gilbert viewed the end of the strife with pleasure, and felt grateful to Mr Sansom for reconciling the discordant elements. That they could ever unite against himself did not enter his head. He was a little less sure of his ground when they arrived off the mouth of the Bandeir River, and it became clear that the country of the young chief he had come to visit was not exactly prospering. The few *prahus*, or native vessels—the simplified spelling of his day called them *proas*—that they saw seemed anxious to make all speed out of sight, and even the quickly growing jungle which so soon masks the site of Jhalábor tragedies could not hide the blackened corner-posts of ruined homes. Gilbert landed with a few men, and after a long search ran to earth the crew of a fishing-boat who had hidden their vessel in a tiny creek and huddled shivering on board her, trusting to escape notice. They were all too much terrified to speak at first, or even to realise that their captors were Europeans, but the gift of some bread—an immense delicacy—and Sansom's exhortations in their own language heartened them at last sufficiently to reply to questions, and one of them even remembered seeing Gilbert—Tuan Brinja he called him—on his former visit to Bandeir. He was able to say that Prince Yusuf and his court were still at the capital, but so cruelly had the principality been harried by the pirates on the coast and by the wild tribes from up the river, that he could call little more than the ground on which he stood his own. Gilbert made their hearts glad with presents, and returned to the *Golden Helen*, determining to anchor where he was for the night, and go on up the river in the morning. The uncertainty of the situation decided him to be prepared for defence, and he served out arms to the crew and posted sentries on the deck. It was when he came down to the cabin, after doing this, that he became aware of a feeling of hostility in the air.

“Well, Captain, nice country you've brought us to!” said Sansom.

"We shan't get rich too easily," said Tony. "More kicks than halfpence about Bandeir, seems to me."

"Pray, sir, do you expect me to go about my work with bloodthirsty pirates in ambush behind every tree?" asked Rowton, the naturalist.

"I expect you to do your duty, sir—under an armed escort, if necessary," replied Gilbert, in his most freezing manner.

The surgeon laughed. "Not much comfort there, Rowton—eh? The Captain knew what he was about when he provided medical comforts regardless of expense. No prospect of weighing anchor and sailing back to Singapore just yet, give you my word."

"Most certainly there is not," said Gilbert, answering the unspoken question which he read in the faces of all four men. "If poor Yusuf is in a bad way, he needs our help more than ever—and, gentlemen, he'll get it."

There was no more to be said, and the subject of retreat was not further broached that night. As though to emphasise the dangers of the enterprise, however, Gilbert, sleeping fully dressed in the deck-house, was awakened by a wild outcry from the shore, while the sentries gave the alarm of the approach of some vessel. Half thinking that their fears had deceived them, he beat to quarters, loaded the guns and triced up his boarding-nettings, then, as no assailant appeared, burned a blue light to illuminate the scene. An audible gasp came from the men on the port side of the vessel, for the light fell on row after row of gleaming teeth and shining eyeballs, belonging to the dusky crew of a long, low narrow boat which had approached the *Golden Helen* noiselessly by drifting in with the tide. They were irresistibly impelled to look at the ship when the weird glow burst out and lighted up the river and its wooded banks, but they recovered their presence of mind sooner than did the white men, and swift as an arrow the *prahu* darted ahead, where the guns could not reach her, her crew rowing like one man for safety. The blue light died

down, and before another could be lighted a mocking stentorian voice came from the escaping craft.

"We didn't know you were a warboat, white man. Had you been a trader, we would have caught you as we did the Malays."

The boat was out of sight when the light flared out again, either lost in the shadows or escaped into some creek, and the sailors laughed and cursed heartily at the impudence of the black-fellows. Disregarding the entreaties of his companions, Gilbert ordered the gig to be lowered, and with the crew armed with muskets and cutlasses, rowed ashore. The fishing-boat was where he had seen it at sunset, but its sides were riddled with spears, and round the ashes of their fire on the shore lay the headless bodies of the fishermen, murdered while they slept. The sailors muttered dark threats of vengeance against the pirates, but when they returned on board they told how their leader had not uttered a word, merely lifted his right hand and looked up to heaven.

They weighed anchor in the morning and went on up the river, anchoring again some miles below the capital, that the arrival of the expedition might be announced in due form by a boat sent on in advance. With it, on its return, came a *prahu* bearing one of Prince Yusuf's chief nobles, who came to bid Gilbert welcome in his master's name, and they went on again. The change was great since Gilbert's first visit, for whereas the river near Bandeir had been full of boats of all sizes, rowed by men and children in bright-coloured cottons and silks, now there was hardly one to be seen. The Prince's warboats were anchored below the town, evidently as a protection in case the pirates should be daring enough to raid so far, and some attempt seemed to have been made to erect palisades as fortifications on the land side. But the looks of the inhabitants appeared to show that the fight was already lost, as they peered anxiously at the visitors from their verandahs overhanging the river, or scuttled away in search of a hiding-place.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE FRONT.

WITH due exchange of salutes between the ship and the shore, Gilbert and his friends landed, and were received by Prince Yusuf in his hall of state, built, like all the Jhalábor houses, on piles at the edge of the water, the framework of wood, and the walls, floors, and roof of interlaced bamboo, reeds and palm-leaves. The misfortunes of the state were not allowed to diminish the ceremony proper to the reception, but the countenance of the young Prince looked haggard and careworn as he sat with his guests on one side and his nobles on the other. Gilbert was shocked by the change in him, and almost suspected him of seeking to drown his troubles by means of drugs, so dull and dreamy was his expression. It was quite impossible to exchange any private conversation in the presence of the nobles and the larger circle of seated attendants, and the proceedings were purely formal. Cigars a foot in length were presented to the guests, and tea handed round by kneeling servants, while any pauses in the flow of elaborate compliments were dexterously covered by the performance of the Prince's band. Gilbert could not even ascertain whether Yusuf was aware of the dangerous shrinkage of his power, for any enquiries as to fighting in the principality were put aside with the careless remark that the tribes were always squabbling among themselves. It seemed

to him that there was something like a conspiracy of silence among the nobles who sat listening greedily to keep him from getting into real touch with the Prince, and he fixed as the chief offender Sadr-ud-din, a burly person who had been specially detailed by Yusuf's father as guide, philosopher, and friend to the young man in his viceroyalty. The last lengthy answer to the last inquisitive question having been made through the medium of Sansom, the signal for the termination of the audience was given, and the white men returned to their vessel, the subordinates muttering not inaudibly discontent with the whole thing.

But Gilbert had no time to listen to their views on the subject. The inhabitants of the town had by this time recovered a little from their fright, and were paddling round the ship in their boats, now venturing near enough to exchange a word or two with those on board, then withdrawing in increased terror, and he welcomed their approaches as distracting the attention of his companions. He hurried to his cabin, and discarded the uniform he had worn for the reception, then ordered the gig to put him on shore a little above the palace. A solitary white man in nankin clothes attracted little notice in the alleys behind the houses on the foreshore, since the stay-at-home inhabitants were all in the river balconies watching the ship, and he was able to find the palace, and even make his way to a secluded verandah where Yusuf had often received him in private before. Here, as he expected, he found the Prince, attended only by one elderly and ragged hanger-on instead of a roomful of retainers, and with his velvet coat and satin trousers exchanged for the easiest undress possible, little more than a loincloth and a head-handkerchief. At the sound of the words "Tuan Brinja!" uttered with a cry of delight by the old man, Yusuf looked up listlessly, and meeting Gilbert's eye, burst into tears.

"Am I no longer your friend, then, sir?" asked Gilbert reproachfully. His Malay was equal to a private conversation of this kind, though not to the

flowery platitudes, couched in faultless language, which were the proper thing for a state audience.

"You are my only friend, Tuan Brinja!" cried the unhappy young man. "You should never have left me, for then I should not be in this state."

"But what has happened?" asked Gilbert, accepting a precarious seat on the foot of the bamboo bedstead. "When I saw your Highness last, you were full of hope, determined to do your best for the district, and make it the most prosperous part of your father's dominions."

The answers to this question were many, it seemed. Or at least they were involved and most difficult to disentangle, as they were poured forth by Yusuf, assisted, as though to complicate things further, by the old servant. He had done his best, he swore, but he had never expected Tuan Brinja to be so long away; he had known there was no chance of success without him. When the pirate raids began again, he had wished to lead his warriors against them in person, but all the nobles, headed by Sadr-ud-din, had protested strenuously against the risking of his precious life. His father would hold them responsible if anything happened to him, and they would rather leave the whole country to the pirates than incur his wrath. Knowing that if he persisted in his intention, his array would never be allowed to come in sight of the foe, Yusuf yielded, and sent his Commander-in-Chief in his place. But such war as followed seemed to have been chiefly concerned with words, and when the army returned, alleging victory, they were closely followed by the pirates, who carried off the heads of the whole crew of a warboat incautiously left without support to guard a side-channel of the river. This daring blow had never been repeated, but from that time the pirate incursions had not ceased. When they were pursued, the pirates retreated, but no sooner was the army back from the coast than the raids began again, and nothing would induce the Commander-in-Chief to remain in the threatened area, lest

he should lose his due influence at Bandeir. It was a sordid story that unfolded itself as the Prince related how all his efforts at good government, or even at self-assertion, were checked by the dead weight of his nobles' inertia. They could never agree save in opposing him, but they had succeeded in reducing him to a miserable puppet. The wild tribes of the river, encouraged by the success of the pirates, were attacking the principality on their side, and Yusuf, who had begun his viceroyalty with high hopes and the honest intention of governing well, was thinking darkly of throwing it up and returning to his father's court, a self-confessed failure. To Gilbert, as he listened, it was clear that this was the result at which Sadr-ud-din had been aiming all along. The ostensible reason for removing the Prince to a distance from the court had been to protect him against the machinations of the old King's favourite wife, who was not of royal blood, but considered that this need be no bar to her own son's succeeding to the throne, were his brother once out of the way. But it seemed that Sadr-ud-din must be concerned in the plot, or why had he done so much to make his charge appear a hopeless weakling? It would be easy to persuade the King that a man who could not hold Bandeir would be quite incapable of exercising the sovereignty of Jhalábor, and Yusuf would be relegated to an honourable captivity, which would terminate by poison when the conspirators thought the moment safe.

Gilbert considered the matter deeply as he sat frowning, his chin on his hand. Yusuf, already roused a little from the dull hopelessness of the Malay under misfortune, gazed at his blue eyes and strong face as though he drew comfort from the sight. Presently the white man spoke—but not words of comfort.

"I am disappointed in my friend," he said. "I went back to my own country, as I promised, and have come back prepared to help him build up a great nation in Bandeir. But I find he has lost heart, and

allowed the words of traitors to divert him from his clearest duty. How can I answer for him to those who have come with me, or to the great ones in England who sent him greetings?"

"Your words are true, Tuan," lamented the Prince, his ready tears overflowing again. "I have blackened the face of my friend, and even he turns against me."

"He does nothing of the sort!" said Gilbert brusquely. "Stop crying, sir!" He gripped the other's shoulder, and Yusuf, startled, really did cease weeping. "Tears are for women, swords for men. Is there manhood enough left in your Highness to assert yourself and begin again?"

"If you will tell me what to do, Tuan," was the timid reply. The Prince, dazzled by the blue eyes which blazed into his, his delicate shoulder held by an iron hand, was frightened, and did not attempt to hide it. It was less alarming to obey this rude intruder than to resist him, provided he would accept the responsibility.

"Leave off opium, that's the first thing."

"That will be easy. I take it to drown the thought of all this."

"Sack the Commander-in-Chief, and lead the army yourself."

"But that is not the custom. I could not do it. But you shall be head, and he shall obey you."

"Then let us start up-country at once against the tribes. Once we reach their villages, they must fight or surrender, for they won't take to the hills, and we can bring them to reason. When the pirates hear the warboats are all gone up the river, they will think there's a chance to loot Bandeir, and we shall be able to arrange to catch them on our return."

"It is for you to command, Tuan. The warboats are yours, the army is yours, the Commander-in-Chief is your lowest slave. You bring with you the great ship from Europe, and many white men with guns and swords. Bandeir is in your hands; I myself ask only to obey you."

"Can you stand out against Sadr-ud-din and the nobles, I wonder?" said Gilbert doubtfully.

"Try me, Tuan. Don't ask, but command. You will find I shall obey."

"I will take counsel with my companions, and your Highness shall know the result." Gilbert rose to depart, and the Prince's brow contracted for a moment, since he had not waited to be dismissed. But it was obvious that the omission sprang from concentration of thought, not from rudeness, and Yusuf put the matter aside with a sigh. This strange, overpowering, helpful friend of his was terribly subject to such lapses from good manners, and never even saw that he was guilty of them. If this one were pointed out, he would probably ask what it signified in comparison with the great affairs on hand—so lost were the English to all sense of the relative importance of things.

Gilbert's companions had not heard his promise to take counsel with them, but had they done so, they would probably have laughed, so far was he from taking counsel with anybody. When he met them at dinner he issued his orders, without the faintest expectation of meeting with contradiction. Captain Briggs and Tony Ridding were to remain in charge of the *Golden Helen*, which was to anchor abreast of the palace, and be prepared to repel any night attack on the part of the pirates. The rest were to accompany the expedition in which he would lead the Bandeir troops up the river, Sansom as interpreter, the doctor in case his professional services were needed, and Rowton in order to pursue his researches in natural history. With them would go twenty of the ship's crew, well armed. For a moment astonishment at the sudden announcement kept the rest silent, then Tony began to protest vehemently against being left behind at the base, when all the fun was going on at the front. His example gave Rowton courage to express anew his very definite objection to prosecuting research on a

war footing, and this provided a way for Gilbert out of the dilemma. Sansom had watched with an appreciative smile the astonishment and wrath which chased one another over his face when he found his orders disputed. He was prepared to insist on instant obedience, but some tardy realisation of the difficulties of his position, should his comrades follow him unwillingly, induced him to accept the offered compromise, and allow Rowton to remain on board—though very definitely under Captain Briggs's orders—in Tony's place.

Perhaps it was as well that his own followers had given him a foretaste of what was before him, for the Bandeir notables were by no means as ready to accept his authority as their Prince had been. Sharif Ali, the Commander-in-Chief, declined absolutely to allow himself to be superseded by a foreigner without referring the matter to his master the King, and as time was above all things precious, Gilbert compromised matters again, and consented that the two forces should proceed as allies. Then all the nobles, led by Sadr-ud-din, protested vehemently against the Prince's determination to expose his precious person in the field, and nothing but Gilbert's scorn could have kept Yusuf firm. For one who had hitherto been plastic in the hands of his councillors, he acquitted himself nobly; but when the warboats, led by the boats of the *Golden Helen*, were about to start, and only waited for the Prince, word was brought to the disgusted Gilbert that his Highness was indisposed, and could not leave the palace that day. For a moment the Englishman was almost inclined to pursue him into the dark and unclean recesses of the private apartments and drag him on board willy-nilly, but the reflection that the whole thing was probably a plot on the part of the nobles to prevent the starting of the expedition induced him rather to order an immediate departure, leaving the correct messages of condolence unsent. The first day's voyage was uneventful, save for the exceeding ill-

humour of Sharif Ali, which confirmed Gilbert's diagnosis of the case, and which was increased by the white man's insisting on choosing a defensible spot for the night's camp, and hedging it with thorny bushes. They had not even reached the country of the wild tribes, the Malays argued, so how could it possibly be necessary to defend the camp? This settled, they displayed intense reluctance to appoint sentries. If any had to stay awake, all ought to do so, they declared, since for two or three to lose their night's rest for the sake of the others was most unfair. They objected quite as much when they found the burden was to be spread over a larger number, and Gilbert was obliged to organise a patrol of his own men to go round and see that the duty was carried out. After this, it was a refreshing novelty in the morning to find Sharif Ali keen enough to suggest sending forward scouts to ascertain the whereabouts of the enemy. Gilbert was most anxious to take the tribes by surprise, in order that with a less determined resistance there might be less bloodshed, and he gladly agreed to the despatch of the soldiers most celebrated for their knowledge of the jungle to discover whether the news of the approach of the force had preceded it, and whether any preparation had been made for defence. A day of inactivity followed, much to the taste of the Bandeir army, while their European allies fumed and panted for advance. It was not until midnight that the scouts returned, highly pleased with themselves for having saved their heads. They had come upon a village of the tribesmen, and finding the men absent, had killed all the women and children they could, then fled before the pursuit of the infuriated husbands and fathers when they returned. Whether they had forgotten all about the necessity for a surprise, or simply did not understand its nature, was not clear. They were quite satisfied, and their comrades received them with envious applause; that they had betrayed the advance of the force did not occur to them.

Gilbert's wrath boiled over that night, but anger

seemed to be wasted upon Sharif Ali and his troops. They fought in their own way, the white men in theirs, and they did not propose to change. Gilbert would have liked to dash forward at once, but a night advance through thick jungle, buzzing with an angry enemy, was hardly possible to a commander hampered by allies on whom, as he was now beginning to understand, there could be no dependence whatever. He took his revenge by rousing the force at an unearthly hour in the morning, and announcing that the boats were all starting, and any man not in his place would be left behind. Fear of the injured tribesmen drove the Malays to obey, and shivering, sulky, and breakfastless, they embarked, Tony's boat following at the tail of the procession to whip up the laggards. All day they strove against the stream, Gilbert stimulating them by threats and encouragement to most unwonted exertion. But it was in vain. At sunset he climbed a tree which stood up high above the rest, and was supposed to give a view for many miles round, and succeeded in distinguishing the village visited by his scouts. But it was no longer undefended, for a strong stockade—the new-cut palisades of which shone in the evening light—made it into something like a fortress. With European or Indian troops Gilbert would have strained every nerve to press on at once and come on the rear of the village before the circle of the stockade was complete, but there was no hope that the Malays would respond to such a call. They lay about like dead things, hardly able to draw up their boats to the shore, and he and his Europeans had to do almost all the work of fencing the camp themselves. Had the tribesmen ventured on a night attack, the Malays must have been butchered like sheep, but it seemed probable that both parties were equally afraid of one another when it came to a fair fight. This, at least, was the impression left on Gilbert's mind the next day, when his force followed him—with what struck him as unexpected courage—within sight of the fortified village. No heads appeared above the pali-

sades, and he would have gone forward to parley, but Sharif Ali and his subordinates restrained him forcibly. They were responsible to the Prince for his valuable life, they assured him; he did not yet know the Jhalábor way of fighting, but he should see it.

The Jhalábor way, when demonstrated by these eminent practitioners, was not particularly effective to the Western mind, since it consisted in selecting a point of vantage—tree or hillock—just beyond the range of the defenders' missiles, and taunting them for hiding behind walls. The tribesmen, very naturally, declined the invitation to forsake their fortress and fight in the open, and requested their foes to come on and fetch them if they wanted them. When all the loudest-lunged combatants on both sides were exhausted, hostilities ceased by mutual consent, and peace reigned inside and outside the stockade. With bitter irony Gilbert enquired of Sharif Ali what was the next stage in Jhalábor fighting, and learned that it was to build a stockade of their own, from which to exchange defiances with the foe. He did not object to fortifying the camp, since it seemed incredible that any enemy could leave an opposing force entirely unmolested, but he soon learned that the use of the stockade was purely that suggested. Such survey as he was able to make of the enemy's country showed that there were plenty of villages, all the more distant of which were undefended, but every suggestion of a flanking movement was scouted by Sharif Ali as unprecedented and therefore impossible. They had constructed a nice fortification and invited the enemy to come and attack it; since the enemy refused to play, the game would simply cease when they were all tired. On the whole, Gilbert was not surprised at the gradual shrinkage of the frontiers of Bandeir, since the only reason why the principality was not wiped out altogether seemed to be that the tribesmen had no more stomach for fair fighting than their foes. One attempt, and only one, at a surprise attack he made. A young and comparatively energetic commander,

named Abubakr, consented to accompany him with his men, unknown to Sharif Ali, on an expedition against the rear of the original fortified village. Consideration for his allies induced Gilbert to shorten the distance to be travelled through the spirit-haunted jungle as much as possible, and he led his force as near the corner of the village as he dared. There was no alarm from the walls, all seemed going well, when a loud voice was uplifted from his own ranks. Abubakr, presumably struck by the danger of the enterprise in which he was engaged, was saying his prayers! A hail of arrows and spears from the stockade was the answer, and Abubakr and his men retraced their steps with all imaginable speed. The ten sailors Gilbert had brought with him were anxious to go on and attack the village alone, but he knew that any disaster to him would mean the instant abandonment of the expedition, and led them back reluctantly in the footsteps of their bolting friends.

The force had little enough to show for its fortnight's campaigning when Prince Yusuf arrived suddenly, attended by the protesting Sadr-ud-din, who had remained at Bandeir to look after him. It did not surprise Gilbert to learn that on the morning of the departure of the troops the Prince had been drugged to prevent his accompanying them, and with the connivance of his doctors had practically been kept a prisoner in the palace ever since. As the effects of the drug wore off, he realised what had happened, but dissembled his wrath until he was able to make a dash for freedom. Then he asserted himself to some purpose, much to the disappointment of his nobles, who cursed the influence of Tuan Brinja, which led him to drag them inexorably up the river, instead of sitting in his palace, as became his rank, and waiting for news of those who were fighting for him.

There was disappointment in store for Yusuf also when, full of pride in his victory, he greeted his

friend, for Gilbert, disgusted by the behaviour of his allies, was on the point of withdrawing from the front with his own men. It was not only the Malays who were unsatisfactory, for he was beginning to realise that Tony, ever ardent when fighting was not immediately in prospect, was as careful of his skin as any of Sharif Ali's men, while he read a cynical amusement in the smile with which Sansom met each fresh failure. It was the Prince's turn this time to offer encouragement, to entreat his friend not to leave him with his task unaccomplished, to swear that he would not go down the river again until the tribesmen were subdued. Gilbert could not resist an appeal of such a nature. He promised to remain if he were given control of the operations, which was promised once more. Immediately the two young men were confronted by a demand from Sharif Ali that the Prince should return to Bandeir at once. Were his sacred person known to be in danger, the courage of all his valiant soldiers would instantly turn to fear!

CHAPTER V.

THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN.

EVEN in the comic-opera warfare to which he was reluctantly becoming accustomed, it was impossible for Gilbert to imagine any deeper depth of cowardice to which the Bandeir troops could descend, but Sharif Ali evidently considered that they had acquitted themselves gallantly hitherto, and that the threatened loss of their martial spirit would prove most alarming. The Englishman would probably have been forced to yield, for Sadr-ud-din and Sharif Ali and their colleagues combined to keep the unfortunate Yusuf a prisoner, debarred from setting foot outside the enclosure built for him in the middle of the camp, and guarded at every step by an escort that pressed so closely upon him as hardly to allow him to move. But it was only in accordance with the topsy-turvy nature of the situation that the Prince's presence at the front—so subversive of all propriety in the opinion of the Malays—should prove the necessary lever to incline the tribesmen to surrender. Such an unprecedented event as the presence of the ruler at the seat of war convinced them that their annihilation must have been decided upon—since why should he have come were it not to behold some wholesale destruction wrought by the magic of his strange allies, the white men? Therefore they intimated a willingness to negotiate, but with what they no doubt considered super-

human cunning, declined to discuss terms with any one but Tuan Brinja. On three separate days, therefore, Gilbert met the tribal chiefs on neutral ground between the two stockades, in full view of the opposing forces. But the tribes demanded an amnesty, and to this the Bandeir nobles who formed Yusuf's council would by no means agree. Their idea of the successful termination of a campaign was a massacre of unarmed prisoners, and nothing that Gilbert could propose in the way of restoration of stolen property, compensation to the relatives of murdered Bandeireans, and hostages for future good behaviour, could satisfy them. The negotiations were broken off, and war was resumed—in so far as attacks by bands of ten or twelve men of either side on any hapless individual, preferably a woman, belonging to the other party, whom they caught foraging in the jungle, could be called war.

But Gilbert had done better than he knew when his advice brought Yusuf to the front. The Prince's presence inspired the tribesmen with the novel idea—impossible even to conceive in any previous campaign—of at once ridding themselves of their foes and inflicting eternal disgrace on them by carrying off their ruler's head. Accordingly, a strong party started one night to surprise the camp. Since they were entirely unversed in night attacks on fortified positions—which they, as well as the Malays, were wont to regard as places to be most religiously let alone—it is not surprising that they blundered upon the part of the stockade held by the Europeans, who were spoiling for a fight after their long inaction. The fight was brief and decisive—by no means protracted enough to satisfy the sailors, who would fain have pursued the retreating foe to their stronghold and followed them in, had they not been impeded by the busy troops of Bandeir, who performed prodigies of valour in cutting off stragglers and murdering the wounded. They were not detached from this agreeable duty until Gilbert had threatened to shoot every man he caught so engaged, and had chased Abubakr

over the field with murderous intent, the chief saving himself only by taking refuge in the camp, and there bursting through Yusuf's bodyguard and laying hold on the royal draperies.

A very dispirited and subdued enemy requested terms again the next day, just as Sansom and Tony were protesting loudly that the ghastly relics of the fight in the space between the two stockades would make the place uninhabitable, and the Malays had better be allowed to finish the affair off in their own way. This meant poisoning the river above the tribesmen's villages—an enterprise for which Sharif Ali had several times intimated that he had volunteers in abundance, but which Gilbert had absolutely forbidden. His will was as strong as ever, but he felt that an attack of fever was coming on, and he had dismal forebodings as to the fate of the tribes if he was laid aside helpless, and his comrades and the Bandeir army worked together. It only needed the discovery of a plot among the Malays to seize and kill the tribal chiefs when they came in unarmed to negotiate to drive away the fever for the time, and after the satisfaction of giving Sharif Ali and the other nobles his candid opinion of their character and deserts, he went out like a giant refreshed to take part in the discussions. The simple minds of the tribesmen had by this time evolved a rudimentary scheme for dividing the forces opposed to them, and they pressed it with all earnestness: Let Tuan Brinja withdraw from his alliance with Bandeir, and place himself at the head of the tribes. They would all rally to him and acknowledge his authority, and help him to conquer Bandeir for himself. He should have all the spoil, all the trade, their share should only be the heads of the slain—and even these, instead of being dispersed among the various villages, should be suspended for preservation in a central building, to the honour and glory of the wonderful white man from whom emanated the power which had brought about so glorious a victory.

The childish depravity of the scheme would have

made Gilbert laugh at any other time, but in his present over-wrought state of mind and body it was nearer drawing tears from him. How were these wretched people—tribesmen and Malays alike—to be saved from themselves and from each other? He gave his hearers a scolding much like that under which Sharif Ali was smarting, and settled down to negotiate. The crux was still the question of amnesty. The tribes would resume their allegiance to Bandeir and acknowledge Yusuf's authority, pay tribute to his officers and conduct their trade through his markets, provided they were secured against aggression by his troops. They would be satisfied with Gilbert's word, and Gilbert could not give it, for the Malays declared with one voice that to grant security to returning rebels was out of the question. The utmost he could gain was the promise that unconditional surrender should be considered a claim to favourable treatment. The fever was coming on again now, and he was alternately burning hot and deadly cold as he made his way slowly and stumblingly between the two camps, but he could not obtain the assurance which would justify him in giving his word to the tribes. It was Prince Yusuf who saved the situation at last, driven desperate by his friend's suffering condition. He gave Gilbert his royal word that there should be no massacre. The promise could not be passed on to the tribes, for that would have been too high an honour for revolted subjects. Gilbert told them plainly that he could give them no guarantee of their lives, but that if they surrendered he would do his best to save them, and this they accepted at last. By sheer force of will he kept up until he had seen both parties engaged—separately, for precaution's sake—in preparation for a great feast, and then collapsed, assuring Sharif Ali and the nobles with his last conscious breath that he would shoot them all with his own hand if a single man, woman, or child of the tribes was killed. More effective probably than this menace, which was discounted by what seemed to the Malays

the obvious fact that the speaker would never again rise from his bed to shoot any one, was the Prince's proclamation that any Bandeirean who killed a tribesman would die in a highly elaborate way, after which his head would be handed over to the representatives of the murdered person. This was the finishing touch. Loud and long were the murmurs as to the witchcraft with which Tuan Brinja had blinded the eyes of the King's son, but no one was foolhardy enough to provoke a doom not merely of discomfort, but of disgrace.

Gilbert's constitution proved tougher than his affectionate allies expected—possibly owing to the fact that his collapse delivered him helpless into the doctor's hands, so that he had no opportunity of resisting remedial measures. He would probably have recovered much sooner than he did had it not been for the disturbance caused by the arrival of a message from Captain Briggs the first day that he was able to sit up. The old sailor wrote in wild excitement, saying that the night before a pirate fleet had ventured up the river as far as Bandeir, but had not attacked either the place or the ship, slipping past in the darkness. He could easily have caught them up, but a prisoner who had dropped overboard from one of the prahus and escaped to the town brought the news that the object of the pirates was to fall upon the rear of the army and annihilate it. Happily their boats must follow the windings of the river, and he was sending this warning overland, so that Gilbert might turn the tables and drive the pirates back into the jaws of the *Golden Helen*. Bodily weakness was forgotten when Gilbert received the news. He had himself carried on board his boat, and led the warboats of Bandeir against the unsuspecting pirates. Never was there such a surprise for those who were bent on surprising a foe, for even the warriors of Bandeir could be bold when they knew they had their opponents in a trap. After the first clash there was a running fight down the river until the sounds of conflict reached the

ears of Captain Briggs, who had brought his vessel as far up as the depth of water would allow. In their desperation the pirates would have attacked the *Golden Helen*, but when she steamed among them, her paddles battering and sinking their boats while her guns roared overhead, she put the finishing touch to their panic. They fled in all directions, some few escaping down the river, others gaining the bank and the jungle, there to fall into the hands of the lately revolted tribesmen, who had joyfully attached themselves to the army in the hope of a harvest of heads, and others dashing blindly back among their pursuers. Once more Gilbert, propped up in his boat, exhausted himself in threats and promises to induce his allies to give quarter, and when the slaughter ceased for lack of victims, was carried on shore more dead than alive.

A very bad time followed. He had known fever in India, but not the pitiless fever of this riverine jungle, which was like a devouring beast sucking every drop of strength and energy out of him. How he survived at all was a marvel to the rest, but Sansom confided to Rowton that it was through sheer obstinacy. Nothing could possibly have become him so well as death at this moment of victory, when he had broken the resistance of the tribesmen and given the pirates a lesson that would last them for years, leaving a grateful Bandeir open for exploitation on common-sense lines; but was he therefore going to die? Not a bit of it! He was determined to live and make himself a nuisance with his absurd humanitarian ideas.

Health returned very slowly, and it seemed as though the buoyant spirit which had refused to see difficulties was gone for ever. It was a changed and very sober Gilbert who was taken up the river and thence into the hills by the anxious Yusuf as the sole hope of saving his life. The Bandeir nobles grumbled loudly at their ruler's preoccupation with the white man, whose death would have seemed to them also a most fitting crown to his labours on behalf of the state. But the people generally regarded Tuan Brinja as only a little less

than divine, and the tribesmen sat in rows outside his hut at each halting-place on the journey in the hope of seeing him. When he would condescend to occupy one of their great family houses, with its ghastly decoration of smoke-dried human heads happily indistinguishable in the shadows of the roof, they were beside themselves with joy. Their great idea was to rub his feet and arms with their hands and then rub their own faces, thus transferring to themselves, as they explained, some of the virtue emanating from Tuan Brinja; and a guard had to be set over him at night to drive away the old women of the tribe, privileged beings who would otherwise have given him no rest by their constant endeavours to catch his breath in their cupped hands. The water he had used for washing, so they informed him proudly, was saved for soaking the rice-seed, so that it might produce double crops.

These and similar manifestations of respect served as material for a good deal of rather bitter mirth on the part of Gilbert's companions, who did not share in the veneration lavished on their head. At best, so they were given to understand, they were regarded as thrice-fortunate beings to be in attendance on such a master, and they demanded savagely of one another who Berringer was that he should be stuck on this pedestal above them. Every stage of the way showed new riches which the country might export if it were only properly developed, promising abundant wealth to three deserving men, and there was that enthusiastic fool thinking of nothing but the welfare of the blacks! Not even his illness could dry up the springs of Gilbert's philanthropy. The doctor, who was coming to regard him with something more of affection than the rest, found it was useless to forbid the receptions he held from his bed, with Yusuf sitting beside him, the disgusted Bandeir nobles forming a semicircle on one side and the tribal chiefs on the other. Grievances were enquired into, old causes of offence brought into the light and discussed, and the foundations laid of an

improved system of intercourse between Malay and tribesman. The one obstacle which revealed itself was the obvious determination of the Bandeir magnates to slip back into the old bad ways as soon as Gilbert's back was turned, and the perception of this was slowly leading him to a momentous decision. It was precipitated by bad news from the *Golden Helen*, which Captain Briggs reported as in duty bound, though reluctantly. All the boat's crew which had accompanied the expedition against the tribes were down with fever, and two of them had died.

The news reached Gilbert in his eyrie on a lofty hill which the tribesmen who dwelt at its foot would never climb. They lived in horrible fear of provoking the wrath of the spirit who lived there, and they had seen the Prince and Tuan Brinja ascend it with lamentation and misgiving. This meant a welcome respite from their obtrusive attentions, and the Malays ran up a small village of houses, built of rattan and palm-leaves, with corner-posts of trees still rooted in the soil, which made a pleasant sanitarium. Here Yusuf sought Gilbert in his own house at noon on the day when Captain Briggs's messenger arrived. He was sitting with his head buried in his hands, but rose to welcome his visitor, who had taken advantage of the slumbers of his court to come unattended by any one but his ragged henchman. The Prince glanced at the letters lying on the box which served for a table, and then at the Englishman's still ghastly face, from which every shred of colour appeared to have been bleached.

"My friend," he said affectionately, "I know your thoughts, and they are mine also. You think you have sacrificed your health in vain, since we of Bandeir have no mind to follow your wise counsel, even after all you have done for us. It is true—save that I have indeed the mind to obey, though I cannot struggle against all the nobles leagued together. What can be done, that all your valour and wisdom be not wasted? Only this."

He paused for a dramatic moment, while Gilbert,

playing listlessly with the pen on the table, looked up with little interest. "You are very good, sir," he said.

"If you say that now, my friend, what will you say when you hear what I am going to tell you? For I have thought this thought by myself, not consulting even Sadr-ud-din, whom my father sent to be with me, and this I say. Take the government of Bandeir for yourself, my friend, holding it as a fief from my father, as I do now. If I, his son, make this request of him, who shall gainsay it? The change is to his advantage, for your care will increase the revenue, which has been falling off until there was little or nothing to send. With his authority behind you, all men will submit to your rule, Malays as well as tribesmen, for you are not bound by the customs of Jhalábor, with which the nobles keep me in slavery while calling me their Prince."

Gilbert had been listening with painful attention. Now he spoke huskily. "I don't quite understand," he said. "What is it exactly that you propose, Prince?"

"I wish to hand over to my friend the government of Bandeir, placing him in the position I have hitherto held as representing my lord and father, and reserving to myself only the right to dwell near him and observe the wisdom of his rule. Or if that be displeasing to him, I will even retire to Jhalábor, and live near the King, that my friend may know that my heart is honest in desiring his glory and the welfare of the people."

"That you must certainly not do," said Gilbert bluntly. "You know very well your life would not be safe."

Yusuf bowed his head. "My life is my friend's," he said; "let him dispose of it as he will. If it seems good to him that I should remain near at hand, so be it; perhaps the people would wonder less at my retirement when they were daily witnesses of the friendship between us. But if he prefers that I should depart, it is for him to bid me go."

Gilbert was deeply touched. He knew, none better,

how greatly the presence of Yusuf's court, with its nobles and its hangers-on, would add to his difficulties, but the Prince was his friend, and the offer he made involved a very real sacrifice—even though he shrank from the greater sacrifice of trying to govern the district himself on the white man's lines. He could not be allowed to return to his father's court, there to be the continual target for the malice of the King's low-born favourite and the partisans of her son, while if he expressed a desire to settle in any other part of the Jhalábor dominions it would be taken for granted that he was trying to set himself up in opposition to the sovereign—which again would mean a swift and early death. Yusuf must certainly remain in Bandeir.

Gilbert rose unsteadily, helping himself by the table. "You speak as a true friend, Prince," he said. "But I must consider. This proposal of yours means much to me—I must question with myself whether I am worthy to accept it. No, my friend"—he disclaimed with a gesture the Prince's eager asseveration—"you don't understand. To give myself to Bandeir I must give up my own land, and I will not do that without counting the cost."

"All Bandeir is yours," said Yusuf simply, quite missing the meaning of Gilbert's giving himself to Bandeir. "But take what time you will, my friend. I know you won't disappoint me."

He and the ragged henchman slipped out as they had come, and Gilbert took up his great sun-hat, of smooth feathered birdskin lined with green, and walked slowly across the verandah. Three of his companions were there—Rowton asleep, Sansom and Tony awake and cross.

"Finished your palaver at last—eh?" demanded Sansom. "Wonderful what a lot you and Yusuf have got to jaw about! Did he come to offer to hand over Bandeir to you in perpetuity?"

It was a startlingly good shot, but Gilbert realised that the thin leaf walls were no obstacle to the passage of sound, and Sansom had probably gained a very fair

idea of the gist of the conversation. "I can't make any statement until I have considered the matter," he said coldly.

"Don't be so precious stiff!" said Sansom, with deliberate rudeness. "Tell you what, Captain Beringer, these high and mighty airs of yours ain't the thing with us. You ain't alone in this business, you know. We're all with you, and if you think you'll slip out of going shares, you're uncommonly mistaken. Let me tell you you don't take over Bandeir without a hard-and-fast agreement as to what is due to us."

"Let me recommend a little more politeness in your manner, Mr Sansom. If I don't take over Bandeir you will get nothing, so far as I see."

"Oh, we'll look after ourselves all right," said Tony quickly, disregarding a murderous glance from Sansom. "Don't you make yourself unhappy about that, old boy. We are going to take Bandeir in hand if you turn tail. Why, d'ye know, there's gold—*gold*—in the rocks on the way up here! That China boy of Sansom's——"

Here the owner of the China boy dealt him so vicious a kick that he collapsed feebly, rubbing his leg. Gilbert looked at them both. "I begin to see," he remarked slowly. "Let me relieve your minds. It is extremely probable—practically certain, indeed—that I shall take over Bandeir, but the transfer will be a personal one to myself, not to my colleagues in the expedition. If you have any objection to this, either of you, be good enough to say so, and if I have to mortgage everything I am ever likely to possess in this world, I'll buy you both out as soon as I can raise the money in Singapore."

"There you go!" said Sansom. "Always wanting to pick a quarrel, never willing to make allowances for a man who's lost all his sleep through your chattering! Don't, pray, try and come the moneyed person over us, for we know better. You couldn't buy us out to save your life, and we don't want to be bought out. What we want is to be sure that our interests ain't

entirely forgot when you're settling things up with Yusuf. If we have your word they won't be—why, that's enough for us, and I'll apologise as handsome as you please for my warmth just now. There's my hand on it!"

He held out his hand with such friendly openness that Gilbert could not refuse it. "You understand, both of you," he said, looking doubtfully from one to the other, "that we govern Bandeir entirely in the interests of the people—not our own? We are not here to make fortunes, but to help the Bandeireans."

"Oh, bless you, yes!" returned Sansom heartily. "If we don't understand that by this time, it ain't for want of having it hammered into us. You guarantee us a regular ten per cent, and we won't bother about fortunes."

"I can't guarantee——" Gilbert began, then, meeting the amiable grin on Sansom's face, he hesitated. "What a fellow you are for jokes!" he said, as he went down the ladder which connected the verandah with the ground. The other two looked after him. Not until he was safely out of hearing did Sansom turn upon Tony, and swear at him with great fluency and precision.

"You doubly distilled fool, to give him the office in that style!" he cried. "Berringer was in two minds whether to go or stay, and now you've made it absolutely certain that he will stay. Without him we might have been merchant princes in a year, but with him here we may be thankful if we cover expenses."

"I'm uncommon sorry," protested Tony. "I'm sure I want the money just as much as you do. I never thought——"

"But you've got to think," the other cut him short ruthlessly. "If we are to make anything out of this business, it won't suit our turn for you to go opening your heart to Berringer whenever you have had a brandy pawnee. You must restrict your drinks, my young friend, if you want to keep your head in this climate, much more make a fortune. A fortune is

what I want, and I make no bones about it. Bread and water and philanthropy ain't what I came to Bandeir for."

"Nor any of us," said Rowton, who had waked, and was listening sleepily—"unless it's that fool up there."

He indicated lazily the white-clad figure under the look-out tree at the summit of the hill, where Gilbert, gazing out over the riotous green of the jungle which seemed to surge upwards like waves, the wide expanse of paddy-fields and the cane-built villages of the lowlands, and the far gleam of deep blue sea, was giving himself again to the service of God and humanity, as represented to him by Bandeir.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND HIM.

"To you, my dear sister, who have always been my confidant, I send this brief scrawl, supplementing what I have already written to our parents. From this day forward I devote myself wholly to Bander. I dare not expect my life to be a long one—my health, I fear, is irretrievably shattered—but be it long or short, it shall go to justify the confidence reposed in me by Eusoff. You know, for your gentle sympathy elicited the confession, that I had thoughts of marriage; you know also how conclusively my hopes were frustrated. I can now perceive that it is better thus. This is no climate for a white woman. Two of my seamen—as hardy fellows as you would wish to see, and picked men—have succumbed to its deadly influence; and could I dare to expose a delicate female to so awful a risk? Nay, my Agnes, your brother is not so selfish a being as to sacrifice a wife to the duty he must conceive himself as doomed to undertake."

"He means *fated*, I suppose," said Lettice sharply.

"Oh, what do words signify now?" Agnes was crying softly.

"The right word always signifies," said Lettice, with a dogmatism that struck her friend dumb. They were sitting over the fire in Agnes's bedroom, with the red moreen curtains drawn to shut out the

chill of the snow that pattered thickly on the windows. Lettice was spending the day at the Hall because Agnes had a delicate chest, and was not allowed out in cold weather. The Squire was in bed with an attack of gout, and Mrs Berringer, like the admirable wife she was, was sitting with him to soothe his sufferings and gently chide his expressions of impatience. Hence the two girls had been able to steal away unrebuked to the sole stronghold—and that an inadequate one—possessed by the girl of that day. Lettice sat very upright in the great winged arm-chair which was provided in case of sickness, her slight form in its stuff gown outlined against the dancing flames. Agnes sat on a footstool at her feet, leaning her slender willowy figure against her friend's knee, and raising tear-drowned blue eyes—so like Gilbert's, and yet so strangely unlike—to her face. All day poor Agnes had been haunted by misery at the thought of the news she had to tell, mingled with an appalling sense of guilt in that she had taken the desperate resolution of keeping Gilbert's note a secret from her mother. She and Lettice had not been alone together until now, for not even the claims of her suffering husband could tempt Mrs Berringer to dispense with the regulation hour of polite conversation in the drawing-room after lunch. But at last she apologised—more to vindicate her own sense of propriety than because she thought it due to Lettice—and withdrew, and Agnes, with starting tears, had whispered hysterically to her friend, "Come—come to my room. I have something so shocking to show you." Then Lettice found the thin blotted sheet thrust blindly into her hand, and she read it through with dry eyes, while Agnes wept bitterly.

"Dear Lettice, don't look so dreadful!" Agnes ventured to glance up when Lettice had uttered her dictum on words, and saw no tears. "Do say something, dearest! Say anything you like about Gilbert—I shan't mind. Oh, I think it is shameful of him!"

"I am not looking dreadful." Lettice freed herself

from the arms about her neck, took a candle from the mantelpiece with a steady hand, and crossed the room to look at herself in the glass. "You are so fanciful, Aggie. I look precisely as usual."

"Lettice, darling, don't take it like this!" implored Agnes, following her and enfolding her again. "Why do you try to hide your poor heart from me? Ain't we"—she corrected herself with a fresh burst of tears—"were we not to be sisters?"

Lettice shivered slightly. "Oh, how cold this room is!" she said impatiently. "Do, pray, come back to the fire. Now let us be sensible. Why should I be surprised if Gilbert has tired of me? I am not pretty or accomplished or attractive, and very naturally he thinks he will be quite as happy without me as with me."

"If he does," said Agnes, as viciously as her gentle lips had ever spoken, "he is a—fool." The awful epithet, forbidden by every code of her acquaintance, human or divine, relieved her mind, and there was a tinge of hope in her next words. "Don't let us be sensible, dearest. How can we be, when the poor dear fellow is so silly? Let us think what can be done."

"Nothing can be done," said Lettice steadily. "Gilbert has left no opening. If he had written to me—but no, I might have tried to make him alter his mind, you see; at least, he thinks so. He has a perfect right to send this message, you must own. There was no engagement between us, and I might never have been free to marry him."

"Oh, don't say it like that!" implored Agnes. "It makes me feel as I should if my dear Mr Donnellan were to die—he would never treat me in this cruel manner, I am convinced. You speak as if all were over."

"All is over," said Lettice, in a voice that admitted of no contradiction. "Even you, my dear Agnes, would hardly expect me to appeal to Captain Ber-ringer's compassion to reverse his decision?"

"But he might change his mind, or"—timidly—"I might write to him——"

Lettice's dark eyes blazed. "At least, Agnes, spare me that humiliation!" she said, in a voice of such pain and exhaustion that Agnes was fain to assure her tearfully that she would never say a word to Gilbert without her leave.

"And now let us talk of something else!" said Lettice brightly, and they proceeded to discuss Agnes's gown for the Hunt Ball. She had scruples as to going at all, because she thought it inconsistent for a girl who hoped to be a clergyman's wife, but her mother's fiat had gone forth, and she felt that her immediate duty was to obey. Lettice, of course, was not going, but this did not mean that her interest in what was to be worn would in ordinary circumstances have been less keen than Agnes's. Even now she kept up her side of the conversation most creditably, and did not betray any relief when a maid knocked at the door to say that Mr Gurr said as the drifts was a-getting so deep, Miss Lettice had ought to start at once if he was ever to get her home that evening. Agnes was instantly ready with the proposal that her friend should stay the night, but Lettice refused, with an inward shudder. They would not know what had become of her at the Rectory, she said, and she drew a humorous picture of Mr Tourneur and the old sexton turning out with lanterns and shovels to look for her in the snow. Mounted on pattens, her skirts well kilted up and her bonnet tied down with a shawl, she left the Hall with the elderly coachman by the back door, for the drifting snow forbade the opening of the front door. She heard the old man shout that they must go round and keep under the shelter of the wall of the kitchen-garden, for no living creature could get down the drive to-night, and then, clinging to his arm, she crossed the pleasure-grounds with him, in a whirl of snow and wind that almost took them off their feet. Gaining the shadow of the wall, they halted to re-

kindle Gurr's lantern, which had blown out, and thereafter edged cautiously along, from one piece of shelter to another, pausing a moment, in spite of the bitter cold, to take breath before any piece of open ground had to be crossed. Lettice obeyed the directions shouted to her, answered intelligently when answer was required, and took cover by instinct when it offered, but she could not have told that she was not walking through the hayfields on a June morning. When she left Agnes the iron band of restraint that had held her seemed to snap, and her whole being went forth in a rush of most natural and healthy anger against Gilbert. How dared he cast her off like this? What right had he to draw all her fancies and aspirations towards him all these years, and then without a moment's warning shake himself free? It was not as though she had been unsympathetic towards his schemes; she had entered into them as no member of his own family had done, they were her schemes as much as his. Had she not given him up without a murmur that he might go and translate them into action—and not merely because they were his schemes, but because their magnitude and unselfishness commended themselves to her own soul? And now he had turned his back on her for the sake of these very schemes! Poor Lettice was face to face with the realisation that giving is comparatively easy; it is when the gift is accepted and taken away that the pain of loss makes itself felt. For the moment her anger was too hot for pain to have its full sway; had Gilbert suddenly appeared before her she would have scathed him with her righteous wrath. What *right* had he—what right—to use her in this way? When they struggled up to the Rectory door, and old Gurr held up his lantern to find the knocker, he was astonished when the light fell on Lettice's face. Under her snow-covered bonnet her eyes and cheeks were aglow; she looked positively beautiful. When Gurr got home he told his wife that he had never thought Miss Lettice good enough for

the Captain before, but now he was inclined to believe it was t'other way about.

The glow had faded when they stepped into the little hall, which seemed so small and warm and confined after the great cold spaces in which Lettice's mind and body had been battling. Old Rebecca relieved her of the snow-laden bonnet and cloak, pattens and overshoes, and led off Gurr to the kitchen, to be comforted with mulled beer before fighting his way back to the Hall in company with the old postman, who had not yet completed his day's round, but thought a night's rest at the stables would be preferable to attempting to reach his home in the next village. The quietness of the house struck Lettice anew as she turned towards the parlour door. No one had even come out to meet her, but this was not to be wondered at, since Emily had been in bed all day with a bad cold and the first volume of Alison's 'History of Europe.' It was accepted in the Tourneur family that minor ailments were a predestined opportunity for the study of serious works for which leisure would otherwise have been lacking. Mr Tourneur looked up from his three-days-old *Times* as the door opened, his fine profile silhouetted against the candle-light at his elbow. When her father's good looks struck her as vividly as they did at this moment, Lettice always wished she could draw. Aunt Sophy, knitting at the opposite side of the round table, broke into a little twitter of excitement and reproach.

"Oh, my dear, you are late—sadly late! Had you forgot your dear Papa would be waiting to read the paper to us?—so kind of him! To waste his valuable time——!"

"I am sorry to be late, Aunt Sophy. Sometimes Gurr wondered whether we should get back at all. The storm is tremendous till you are out of the wind."

"Gurr is having some refreshment, I suppose?" Mr Tourneur's voice drowned Aunt Sophy's anxious enquiry whether Lettice was quite certain her feet were not wet.

"He has gone to the kitchen, Papa. I knew Rebecca would have something hot for him." Lettice took her workbox from the side table, and sat down by her aunt. They shared the second candle, and it was one of Lettice's duties to prevent a conflagration when Aunt Sophy, overcome by the profundity of the literary fare provided for her, nodded so violently as to bring her cap in contact with the flame. Mr Tourneur fortunately had his back to them as he culled and read aloud such passages as he considered suited to the feminine intellect, and they had a mutual understanding that these lapses were not to come to his knowledge.

Mr Tourneur read, and when he paused, Aunt Sophy nodded wisely, and said, "Very fine!" or "Monstrous, indeed!" or "How truly impressive!" trusting to luck, so Lettice had once told her, for the right assortment of her sentiments. Lettice, setting microscopic stitches in the wristbands of her father's shirts—such as it would ruin modern eyesight to attempt even by broad daylight—neither commented nor heard. The spirit of revolt, stirred within her by Gilbert's action, was taking a wider range. Gilbert had coldly cast her off, it was true, without even giving her a chance to protest. But if in some moment of madness she should be driven to complain to her father, what was more certain than that he would take Gilbert's side? Gilbert, in his opinion, would have a perfect right to act as he had done. It was impossible to conceive of Mr Tourneur as tolerating any other view of the matter—or even as acknowledging that such might exist. No Oriental could hold more fully than he did—in practice, if not in theory—that a woman's possession of a soul was conditioned by her possessing a masculine owner. "She for God in him" was an axiom with which Mr Tourneur's daughters were kept well acquainted as they grew up, and if they did not realise that the only purpose of their existence was to promote, under the direction of those most interested, the welfare successively of father, husband, son,

it was not for want of teaching. To Lettice that night the state of affairs came as a kind of revelation. Here were Aunt Sophy and herself, the one making shirts for Mr Tourneur, the other knitting his stockings, while he dealt out to them such information as he considered to be for their good. It was a picture of their lives, as adjuncts to him. It may be remarked incidentally that Lettice hated this provision of little bits of news plucked from their context. Her opportunity would come when a month's papers were cleared out of the study for lighting the fires, when Rebecca would let her go through them and remove the newspapers.

"Lettice frowning over her work as usual!" Mr Tourneur turned round unexpectedly—perhaps one of Aunt Sophy's comments had proved inadequate. "Have I never told you, my dear, that an amiable expression is the sole reparation a plain woman can offer to society?"

"Yes, Papa," murmured Lettice dutifully. Her face had been so stung by the bitter wind that it could become no redder than before, but perhaps Mr Tourneur took the red for the burning blush of shame and a sign of grace, for he turned back to his paper, apparently mollified. Away went Lettice's thoughts again—this time in the direction of an old woman she had been visiting lately, whose ne'er-do-well son had "gone for a soldier." The youth declined to work when he was at home, and lived upon his mother, abusing her because she could not supply him with better fare, but when he enlisted it seemed as if her heart was broken. The most stringent advice—practically the command—of the Squire and Mr Tourneur was needed to keep her from selling her few poor worldly goods in the hope of buying him out, and when she was at last induced to see that military service was the lad's one chance of reformation, she pinched herself cruelly to send him money and such little luxuries as she could compass. Lettice had found her absolutely devoid of rancour, even of blame for him.

"Bless you, missy! the men's all alike," she said, accepting calmly the burden of self-sacrifice. He had promised to write to her, and during her last illness her one anxiety was for the letter. Even when it failed to arrive, she did not blame him—he was no scholar, he had not time, something had prevented his writing—and she died impressing upon the Rector with her last breath that everything she left was to go to her dear good boy Ezekiel.

Were all men alike in this respect? Until this evening Lettice would have declared unhesitatingly that Gilbert was an exception; now she sorrowfully relegated him to the general category. A fiery indignation, born of pain, burned in her. Was it fair, was it even good for the men, that they should so complacently assume the right to everything, and that the women should encourage them in the assumption? Could nothing be done to put things on a fairer footing? Could she, Lettice Tourneur, do nothing? Of happiness she must now give up all hope, so she told herself, looking forward with sombre eyes down a long gray vista of years; but was there not something she could do on her own initiative, for once not under the direction of another?

Mr Tourneur folded up the paper, and pushed back his chair. It was time for prayers and supper, after which he would retire to his study, and the two ladies to bed. Aunt Sophy, turning to hang up her knitting-bag by the fireplace, gave a little squeak of dismay at the sight of a bundle of books on the side table.

"Oh dear, dear!" she cried; "and we have never covered the tracts! Lettice, you might have reminded me."

"I'm sorry, aunt. But do you think"—if Lettice had not been a little above herself, she would never have uttered the words in her father's presence—"that it's much good doing them? I hardly think the people care for them, or even read them."

"Never let me hear you say such a thing again, Lettice," said Mr Tourneur with deep displeasure.

"Are your duties to be left undone because you may see no immediate profit in them? The less the cottagers care for these excellent publications, the more necessary is it to place them in their hands."

"I will get up early and do them in the morning," said Lettice, prudently declining controversy, as many bitter experiences of earlier years had taught her to do, and when she left the comfortable ugly room, which afforded such a contrast both to the white swirling world without and the fever of her spirit within, she carried the bundle of tracts and brown paper under her arm. The atmosphere of her fireless bedroom struck chill as she entered with her candle, but she did not shiver. Two secret hoards she disinterred from the inmost recesses of the old-fashioned wall cupboard—a store of candle-ends and a pile of carefully smoothed sheets of the coarse blue paper in which soap and similar commodities were wrapped by the grocers of the day—and then she sat down at the broad window-sill with her candle before her. Round her shoulders she wrapped the bed-curtain—all beds had curtains then—which was not shining red moreen, like Agnes's, but an unpleasant clammy-feeling kind of linsey-woolsey, faded and darned out of all semblance of its original colour and pattern, and began to write rapidly in pencil. For Lettice's revolt had crystallised into a definite resolve—she was going to write a tract!

It was years since she had set pencil to paper in a task of her own choosing, though in old days she had written many tragedies and fragments of tragedies—youthful genius exercised itself in tragedies then as now in novels—abounding in gore, ghosts, and gloom. When she went to school she was careful to destroy all the closely written blue fragments, for though Aunt Sophy was sympathetic, her memory was short, and if Peter got into the room and rummaged in the cupboard——! Lettice felt as though she could never show her face again if he read her writings, and what would be far worse, betrayed them to his father. At school

she had not shone in "composition," or the unaided enunciation of the obvious on such highly respectable themes as Thrift, Talent, Industry and Riches. The curriculum was designed to inculcate a correct attitude of mind rather than independence of thought, and originality was studiously discouraged in favour of the insertion of the proper moral remark at the proper place. Therefore Lettice returned from the Clergy Daughters' School with a healthy, though painful, distrust of her own powers as a writer, and felt no inclination to plunge again into tragedy. But now there was no hesitation, no pause for thought. The thing was there, demanding to be written, and she sat down to write it. And if the present generation tends to scoff at her choice of medium, be it remembered that, with the exception of books of travels, tracts were almost the only form of narrative literature she knew. In Mr Tourneur's house, fiction was not so much forbidden as ignored. It might be said not to exist.

She wrote feverishly for two hours or more, snuffing her candle mechanically, or replacing it by a candle-end when it had burnt nearly to the socket. Her hands were stiff with cold, but she was conscious of no other inconvenience. Nowadays her tract would have been called, "When did you Write Home Last?" or "Have you Sent Word to your Mother?" or some similar eye-catching and heart-stirring title—for tracts, like other things, must move with the times—but Lettice could think of nothing better to call it than "The Delayed Letter." She read it rapidly through—her eyes were getting sleepy in spite of her preoccupation with her task, laid the written sheets carefully under the rest of the pile, for fear of intruders, and covered them well up, then undressed, almost helpless with sleep, and went to bed.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST RUNG OF THE LADDER.

FOR the next few days Lettice went heavily in bitterness of soul. She was always quiet, and no one noticed the change except Aunt Sophy, who was sure she must have caught cold, and pursued her with black-currant tea, strips of flannel for her throat, and awesome decoctions of herbs to be taken at bedtime. The girl could hardly have phrased it to herself, but the truth was that with Gilbert's defection all romance and light and colour had gone out of her life. Hitherto, in the dullest days, there had always been the possibility of picturing a future spent in "summer isles of Eden" with Gilbert. She knew the life so well from his talk—the lightly-built houses, the water lapping up almost to the threshold, the amphibious journeyings, the interlacing vegetation, the jungle smell. She was not ignorant of the dark side—the snakes and wild beasts, the fevers, the savagery of the natives—but she was young and strong, and the Spartan upbringing of the Rectory had made her hardy. Never once, in her most apprehensive moments, had she shrunk from the thought of leaving the narrow ways and ordered life of the village, and facing tyrannous nature and inhuman man at Gilbert's side. Had he bidden her come, she would have risen up and followed him without a single misgiving. And now all this was swept away.

"The Delayed Letter" remained hidden in the cup-

board, still in its blue paper dress. Lettice had no desire to read it again, and there was no object in disturbing its repose. It was not even as if she could copy it out. Mr Tourneur kept control of the family writing-paper, and gave it out as required. Aunt Sophy applied regularly for one sheet a week, that she might write to a certain Miss Arabella Housman, the friend of her youth—always the one large sheet, double the present size, crossed and recrossed, and no more—and her nephew handed it to her with only an occasional gibe. He had taken charge of the paper because when she kept it there was never any to be found, but he retained it in his own hands now lest the girls should embark on any foolish correspondence with school-friends. It was quite certain that he would refuse to supply eight or ten sheets for Lettice to waste, even if she could bring herself to declare the purpose for which she wanted it—which she felt she could never do.

The time came for Emily, now recovered from her cold, to return to school. That she should have to go to school at all was a sore point both with herself and her father, who might almost be said to spoil her, if he could spoil any one. It had been intended that Lettice, her own education complete, should superintend Emily's studies, but the suggested arrangement took no heed of the character of either girl. Emily was a hopeless and unabashed dunce, far too conscious of the impression everywhere produced by her lovely face and pretty manners to care about improving her mind, and Lettice was a genuine student, almost pedantically concerned for thoroughness and accuracy. Battles royal were the natural result, with Aunt Sophy hovering round anxiously and ineffectually to try and make peace, until Emily, dashing from the parlour and bursting into only too audible weeping just outside the study door, would bring out her father to rebuke the flushed and ruffled Lettice, who was too proud to tell him that though she might have said hard things to Emily, Emily had said far worse to her. Mr Tourneur

was grievously disappointed in his elder daughter—after all that had been spent upon her education she could not even superintend her young sister's reading!—but he consulted his usual oracle, Theodosia. Theodosia was never at a loss for advice which would be equally disagreeable to all parties concerned; she wrote in fitting terms of Lettice's "peevishness," but she recommended strongly a sojourn at the Clergy Daughters' School for Emily, and her father accepted her counsel.

Lettice and Emily were far better friends now that they saw less of one another, and were not placed in the invidious relation of governess and pupil, but on this occasion Lettice felt unusual eagerness for the holidays to end. Miss Emily's mind was ordinarily fully occupied with matters affecting her pretty self, but she had, so to speak, pegged out a claim in advance in Lettice's future. Gilbert and Lettice were to take her into military society, and generally to provide her with what in that day were called the *agrémens*, naturally denied to a poor clergyman's daughter in a remote country village. If she discovered that her demands in this respect were now impossible of fulfilment, it was quite certain she would make Lettice pay for the deprivation. But happily she failed to read anything from Lettice's face, and went away unsuspecting. Hers was a cross-country journey, not through London, and her father and she had to take the coach in the neighbouring town, and make several changes, since the railway in course of construction had not yet reached Abbotsbridge. They left Sniddingly in the Rectory pony-chaise, a vehicle of extraordinary length and capacity. It had two seats facing each other and another behind, and on this occasion held Mr Tourneur, Emily—in the plain straw bonnet and round cloth cloak which, with a short-sleeved stuff dress, knitted stockings and thick shoes, made up the hated uniform of the school—her box, the Rectory odd man, and Lettice. Lettice was there to see that the odd man returned

from town in proper time, and did not stay drinking after dark, to the detriment of the pony and chaise, but the day was marked with white in her calendar, for she was to take tea with Mrs Akehurst.

Mrs Akehurst was a former governess at the Rectory, who, after some years of being ruled by Theodosia, puzzled and confounded by Lettice, tormented by Peter and flouted by Emily, had taken the desperate step of marrying the principal bookseller in Abbotsbridge. To Mrs Berringer and Miss Tourneur it was appalling that a clergyman's daughter should sink from being a kind of genteel servant to becoming the wife of a prosperous tradesman; but Mr Tourneur, holding that for a woman any husband was better than none at all, pronounced that she had done an uncommonly sensible thing. He had the courage of his convictions, too, and never disdained to drink a cup of tea in the parlour over the shop, after a chat with Mr Akehurst among the books below; and what was more, he allowed Lettice to accept the invitations which shrewd Mrs Akehurst gave only sparingly, testifying a most fitting sense of her presumption in doing so. Unsatisfactory as their intercourse in lesson-time had been, the ex-governess had sufficient greatness of soul to recognise in Lettice capacities far beyond her own, and her kind heart pitied the mental starvation from which the girl suffered.

It was not that the Rectory was a bookless house, but that, like the writing-paper, the books were concentrated in the impregnable fastnesses of the study. One small shelf there was in the parlour, a dainty toy filled with miniature volumes of poetry and forgotten tragedy which had belonged to Mrs Tourneur. These, her lesson-books, and a copy of Bowdler's Shakespeare, were all that was free to Lettice, but in the study books lined the walls and piled the chairs and the edges of the shelves, and among them Mr Tourneur sat and read and wrote. His neighbours were firmly persuaded that he was a regular contributor to the 'Quarterly Review,' but anonymity was

much more strictly observed then than now, and his own family had no idea whether the general belief was justified or not. Supplies of new books arrived regularly from London, to be unpacked and become sacred as their predecessors, until Mr Tourneur had hardly room to move, and at last leant an ear to his aunt's bitter complaint as to the impossibility of dusting the study. Books piled in a certain place on the floor might be taken away and used for household purposes—this was the agreement they reached when Lettice was about twelve, and Lettice became aware of it when on the bottom of a cake she came upon a blood-curdling episode of the Siege of Jerusalem. She read on with eager eyes until the printing ended with the edge of the cake, and then, suddenly realising what the discovery portended, dashed like a whirlwind into the kitchen, to find Rebecca tearing the last handful of leaves out of 'Salathiel' to cover jam-pots with. What followed brought Aunt Sophy to the spot, to find Lettice crying, stamping, storming, to the astonishment and indignation of the household autocrat, whose bewilderment was as great as her wrath. They managed to calm the child at last, for even the offended Rebecca was alarmed by her frenzy, and supplicated pardon humbly, while poor Miss Tourneur—who would have promised anything to get her quiet—promised that she should always look through the books before they were destroyed, and choose out what she liked. Thus, unknown to her father, Lettice won the right to read, though her books were only those he cast out as useless. They were chiefly works on art and literary criticism, and whether he chose them himself, or they were selected by friends acquainted with his tastes, it was very rarely that they included a volume of fiction. Moreover, they had to be read when he was not present, and smuggled under needlework when he appeared suddenly, for Aunt Sophy was desperately ashamed of her soft-heartedness, and had pledged her niece never to betray her.

What a contrast to this stealthy reading was a visit to Mr Akehurst's little world of books, which filled the shop and the small parlour behind it, and overflowed up the stairs and on the landing and into Mrs Akehurst's drawing-room! If Mrs Akehurst had invited her young friend for the pleasure of her conversation she must have been sadly disappointed, for once in a corner with a book Lettice saw and heard nothing more until she was vigorously called and shaken to draw her attention to the presence of tea. She was a voracious reader, and could get through a novel—one of the solid and bulky novels of that day—in an afternoon, knowing it well enough to discuss it eagerly, her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling, with Mr Akehurst at tea, and afterwards to live it over again endlessly by herself. Travels she read, too, and the poetry made by pouring water on the used tea-leaves of the Romantic Revival, and the newer poetry at which Mr Akehurst, following the opinion of his most valued customers, was inclined to look askance—the chief exponent of which was an otherwise unknown young man named Alfred Tennyson.

On this particular afternoon, when Lettice, having parted from her father and sister, and seen the pony put up at the inn, and warned Verrall to come for her at five and not a moment later, walked sedately among the bibliophiles browsing in the shop, and exchanging greetings with Mr Akehurst, was escorted upstairs by the apprentice, there was nothing very new to look at. Mrs Akehurst was disappointed for her sake.

"I did hope to have the new Bulwer for you, Miss Lettice," she said (the prefix was an acknowledgment of her changed position which she, as proud in her way as the ladies who censured her in theirs, would never omit), "but it hasn't come down yet. Here is this month's 'Blackwood,' if you care to look at it"—Lettice's eyes shone—"or if there's any other book in the place you would like to see, you have only to mention it."

The 'Blackwood' was easily first choice, and Lettice settled down in her corner with it, but the successive articles did not lend themselves to entire absorption as a novel did, and presently she became aware that Mrs Akehurst was sorting bundles of booklets on her centre table.

"It's only tracts," she said, catching Lettice's eyes fixed upon her. "We are rather busy in the shop just now, with Lent coming on so early and all, and I offered to do them up here. But there! you wouldn't believe the trouble and the complaints we have had just lately. All the clergy say the cottagers are spoilt by the new cheap series—the Useful Knowledge Library and the rest—and they want something different from the old favourites."

"I wrote a tract the other day," said Lettice. She had no intention of saying anything of the kind, but the words seemed to come mechanically from her lips. Mrs Akehurst looked up with keen interest.

"Did you, indeed? Well now, I wish you would let me see it, Miss Lettice. Something more entertaining—that's what they are asking for, and yours would be a fresh hand, at any rate."

"I—I can't copy it out fair. It's written in pencil on wrapping-paper," confessed Lettice, blushing deeply, and there was a painful pause. Mrs Akehurst was well off. Her gown was of rich silk, her little turn-down collar of real lace, and the large cameo which fastened it a genuine antique. Her kind heart was yearning to supply the girl with all the stationery she needed, but she knew the Tourneur pride far too well to dare to do it. Then a happy thought occurred to her.

"There!" she said, "I was forgetting. Mr Akehurst brought me up a whole quire or more of paper only this morning out of the shop. The edges have got discoloured with being in the window, and I was going to cut them off and use the paper for ham-frills—though I have enough cut to last us for a twelvemonth at least. If you will oblige me, Miss Lettice, by taking the paper and using it up—why, it will be a real

relief to me, for I can't bear things to lie by doing nothing."

"If you're quite sure——" murmured Lettice, yielding to temptation. "If you don't want it——"

"Want it? Why, don't I tell you it will be a favour to rid me of it?" and Mrs Akehurst rustled to her writing-table and produced the paper. "Now, when can you let me have the copy?"

"Oh, I couldn't send it!" cried Lettice, shrinking into herself with terror. "People would find out—Aunt Sophy would ask questions, and she might tell—— But I could come in again on Friday, when the chaise comes to fetch Papa. I could get it done by then."

"Then that's what we'll do," said Mrs Akehurst cheerfully. "You come on Friday and bring it with you, and I'll tell you the truth of what I think about it."

"I—I never meant any one to see it," faltered Lettice. Mrs Akehurst laughed loudly.

"There now! A tract that nobody may see! Pray what good would that be? You trust me, my dear. If it's no good, I won't hesitate to tell you plainly, but if it should be what everybody is asking for—why, there you are!"

Thus encouraged, Lettice took the paper home with her, and sat up a good part of two nights—happily milder weather had succeeded the snow and thaw—copying out her tract in her very best handwriting, guiltless of blot, mistake or erasure. Aunt Sophy was rather surprised that she should want to go into Abbotsbridge again so soon, but consoled herself with the reflection that it was natural for young people to like gadding about, and she carried the precious roll safely to the shop concealed in a music-case and tied up with a brown ribbon from her best summer gown. Mrs Akehurst joyfully produced 'Zanoni' to greet her, and Lettice retired to her corner and was speedily absorbed, merely becoming aware—as it were with the outside only of her mind—that her friend seemed to

have a very bad cold. But she was aroused suddenly by Mrs Akehurst, with tears running down her cheeks, invading the corner and imprisoning her in a capacious embrace.

"Oh, my dear Miss Lettice, how I congratulate you! You could not have done better. I can *see* that poor old woman—and the moral drawn in such a convincing manner! No one could possibly mistake it."

"You really think it is some good?" Lettice was half dazed.

"I do, indeed, my dear! But I won't trust my own judgment. I am going to ask you to let me submit it to a friend of Mr Akehurst's, in whom he has the highest confidence. And meanwhile, my dear, you go on. There must be other facts and incidents from which you could draw lessons in the same way. The important thing is that they should be taken from life, of course."

"Of course," echoed Lettice dutifully, and looked so longingly at the pile of untouched right-hand pages of 'Zanoni' that Mrs Akehurst stifled her yearnings for a good long talk, full of speculation and plans for the future, and left her in peace again until Mr Tourneur called for his daughter. He was not pleased to find that Lettice had come into the town on her own initiative and without the excuse of any household errand—to do him justice, the thought that affection for himself might have brought her did not occur to him—and to mark his displeasure he announced that he should not take her in again with him for some time.

Thus it happened that the spring was far advanced before Lettice mounted the stairs behind the bookshop again. This time she was walking, for the roads were now possible for thin shoes such as all ladies wore, and Aunt Sophy, who had conceived the idea that she was looking pale, discovered a sudden dearth of buttonhole twist—she and Lettice were overhauling their wardrobes for the summer—and despatched her on the long walk for her health's sake. Lettice was not particu-

larly anxious to go. After the first glow of joyful elation produced by Mrs Akehurst's praise had come the inevitable reaction, in which she perceived clearly how absurd it was to imagine that anything she wrote could possibly be thought good enough for publication. Following her friend's directions, she was bringing with her three other tracts she had written, but so low had her hopes sunk that she had hardly been able to persuade herself to copy them out. Only the thought that she would be acting dishonestly if she did not use the paper for the purpose for which it had been given nerved her to do it, and she could not bring herself to rob her gown of another piece of ribbon to tie up the parcel. Common string fastened the roll which she hid jealously under her shawl as she entered the shop and met the beaming gaze of Mr Akehurst.

"Well, now, Miss Lettice, and who would have thought it? And this day of all days, too! Why, my good woman will be ready to jump out of her skin with joy! She was near making up her mind to write to you, but didn't like to risk it."

He moderated his voice in response to Lettice's anxious glance towards the other people in the shop, but insisted on conducting her upstairs himself.

"Well, missus," he cried, throwing open the door with a flourish, "here's a honour for you and me! The new female author come to take tea!"

"*Authoress*, Mr Akehurst," said his wife reprovingly, for that terrible word was coming into general use. "My dear Miss Lettice, I am always glad to see you, as you know, but really, your appearance has never filled me with such joy before. See what I have been keeping for you!" She pulled out a drawer of her writing-table, and disclosed a small pile of neat white booklets. 'The Delayed Letter' stood at the head of the first page.

"Oh no!" cried Lettice, awestruck. "Not — not——?"

"Yes, it is!" good Mrs Akehurst was little less excited than the girl. "That friend whose name I

didn't mention to you was Mr Brode, Richer's traveller, who was coming to supper that evening, and when I showed him your beautiful writing, he read it all through within ten minutes, and he brought down his hand"—

"With a smack on the table"—Mr Akehurst seized the words out of his wife's mouth—"and he says, 'Mrs Akehurst, ma'am,' says he, 'there's the right stuff here!'"

"How you interrupt, Mr Akehurst!" said Mrs Akehurst, with genteel deprecation. "Well, my dear, he insisted, as I might say, on taking away the tract at once to show to Mr Richer, and you being so far away, and in a manner of speaking not to be reached, I thought it better to let him do it, Mr Akehurst agreeing with me. And he'll look at any more you have, my dear, and this is what he left for you when he brought these."

"This" was a tiny packet in carefully sealed white paper. With trembling hands Lettice opened it, and disclosed a fat gold coin. "A guinea—a whole guinea!" she gasped. "Oh, Mrs Akehurst!" The world seemed to reel with her, and she clutched at the good woman's shoulder.

"There, there, my dear!" purred Mrs Akehurst, holding her comfortably against her ample bosom. "That may be the first, but it won't be the last, you take my word for it. There, my dear, you cry if you want to. And if Mr Akehurst"—with asperity—"would be so good as to go and mind his business in the shop, it would be more becoming than standing staring at a young lady overcome by the most sacred emotions!"

The vague dreadfulness of the accusation drove Mr Akehurst downstairs, but he reappeared at tea-time, to joke the now recovered Lettice mercilessly on her imagined future, and to insist on drinking her health in Bohea laced with brandy. Mrs Akehurst "popped on her bonnet," as she said, to walk part of the way home with her, and had nearly reached Sniddingly

before she turned back, so enthralling was the subject of the spending of that wonderful guinea. Writing materials and a supply of candles were all that Lettice wanted for herself, and the rest of the money ought surely to be able to supply presents for everybody. Mrs Akehurst advised prudence. There would be postage, and expenses of that kind, and who knew but that some day Lettice might not be obliged to make a journey to the larger town where Mr Richer carried on his printing and publishing business? The mere possibility of such a thing took the girl's breath away, but she agreed to be careful, and not at first to lay out more than half-a-crown of the money. The culminating point of this astonishing day came when Lettice reached the Rectory, and found that Mr Tourneur had been called away to an outlying farm, for this gave her the opportunity of telling Aunt Sophy the great news, which was received with incredulity almost beyond the possibility of shaking, and joyful tears. Never in all her days had Miss Tourneur imagined the possibility of such a feat as this, that Lettice should write anything that could actually be printed, and in the innocence of her heart she insisted that Mr Tourneur should be told at once. Lettice protested and entreated, but in vain.

"No, my dear, I really cannot allow it," said the old lady stoutly. "It is due to your dear Papa that this interesting intelligence should not be withheld from him. He would blame us, and justly, if we kept it back."

Lettice yielded, for she felt that her father must know some time, and it was better to get it over. But the reality was as terrible as she had pictured it. When Aunt Sophy, trembling with happiness, and scarcely able to speak intelligibly, had succeeded in making her nephew understand that Lettice had actually written a book—a tract, and had got it published—printed, the enthusiasm she had expected was sadly lacking in his reply.

"Indeed!" said Mr Tourneur. "Lettice has learnt

all there is to know, and feels qualified to write tracts to instruct other people? It is more than I do."

He paused a moment—his sense of duty and the fear of being bored evidently waging war—then spoke decisively.

"‘Published’ is an anticipation, I suppose? I beg you will bring me the manuscript, or the proof, or whatever you choose to call the embryo publication, Laetitia, before things go further. I have a duty in the matter."

"Oh, Papa!" cried Lettice, overwhelmed with remorse, "I am so sadly ashamed. It is done—it is printed—before I knew—I had no idea——"

"Pray don't distress yourself, my dear." Mr Tourneur was lighting his candle to go to the study, where a new parcel of books was waiting to be unpacked. "I am relieved, I assure you. No responsibility for circulating unsound doctrine can now rest upon me."

And Mr Tourneur washed his hands of the matter, which became as though it did not exist. Aunt Sophy wept, but Lettice, after the first shock, was as much relieved as her father. At least what she wrote would be her own, and she had a perverse preference for it untouched by his amending pen. She found an extraordinary satisfaction in realising that something she had written was considered by competent judges likely to do good. There may have been something unworthy in the feeling that she was appreciated abroad if not at home, but so diffident was she by nature that the result could not be wholly bad. Once more she had an interest of her own in life—something to which to look forward. She became aware about this time that a curious change had taken place in her feeling towards Gilbert. The rush of furious anger was gone, and was succeeded by a gentle pity. He had sinned against himself far more than against her, in casting away the help and companionship which had meant so much to him in the past, and might have meant so much in the future.

CHAPTER VIII.

LORD OF THE LAND.

GILBERT was confirmed in his kingdom. Somehow or other, Yusuf contrived to impress his views upon his father, despite the whole-hearted opposition of all his nobles, and in a visit to the capital of Jhalábor, Gilbert was solemnly invested with the chieftainship of Bandeir, and was called Datu—Chief—Brinja, instead of the merely polite “Tuan.” It was impossible for him not to perceive that the King regarded the whole affair as a stupendous joke, while the partisans of the favourite wife and her son were at a loss how to take it. Their natural impulse would have been to oppose anything in which Yusuf showed himself keenly interested, but from their point of view it was infinitely preferable that he should remain in honourable exile at Bandeir than that he should throw up the chieftainship and return to the capital. True, it might be easier to effect his removal if he were close at hand, but he was popular, and their feelings towards him were so well guessed that no conceivable way of getting rid of him could avoid arousing suspicion. Therefore they declined to make common cause with Sadr-ud-din and Sharif Ali, and the King pleased himself and his son. His own intention in the matter had nothing altruistic about it. Owing to the depredations of the pirates on the coast, and the tribesmen from up the country, the revenue of Bandeir had bidden fair to be a minus quantity before very long,

and his Majesty, who was never at a loss for objects upon which to spend money, made it a stringent condition of the investiture that the district, under Datu Brinja's rule, should send in its proper tribute year by year. Gilbert did his best to obtain a reduction for the first five years, for besides the expenses of the late war, there was a grievous leeway to be made up in respect of public works, and Yusuf and his court would have to be maintained, but the King was adamant. He was grateful to the Englishman for assisting him to reclaim a province which had almost been lost to the kingdom, and he would show his gratitude by allowing him to administer it, but if the proper revenue was not forthcoming, how would the central government be better off than if Bandeir had been lopped away altogether? The notion of reproductive expenditure—of a sacrifice of revenue now that might bring rich gain in the future—proved impossible of comprehension to the Malay mind, at any rate when besotted by drugs and many years of luxurious living. Gilbert ceased his useless endeavours and returned to his work, trusting that economy, and the increased trade to be expected under improved conditions, would provide sufficient to meet the just claims of all parties concerned.

He did not expect his post to be a sinecure, and he did not find it one. It was true that he entered on his work under the most hopeful auspices, since his fame as the deliverer of the country from the pirates spread in an incredibly short time to the remotest recesses of the jungle. Had he wished it, he might have spent all his time in entertaining parties of admiring and curious Malays, who came to pay their respects to their new ruler, bringing their children with them—a sign of their absolute confidence and friendliness. The tribesmen were less ready to venture into the town, though they persisted in regarding Gilbert as their particular property, since he had relieved them from the oppression of the Malays. They preferred to send a message that they were

waiting a day's journey off in the jungle, and craved to be allowed to contemplate and imbibe the virtue of their adored ruler. Otherwise, how could they be sure that he had not returned to the celestial abode from which he had come, and left them to the mercy of their ancient foes? This matter of interviews was the first that had to be dealt with sternly. The Malays were received at a certain hour in the morning, and allowed to join the circle in Datu Brinja's reception-hall at night. The tribesmen learned that their ruler could not be perpetually journeying to meet them, but that he was always ready to welcome them at his capital, or to receive them in the course of his progresses through their country.

Very early in his experience Gilbert had to learn the lesson of Moses—that the burden of his people was too great for him alone. It was a bitter lesson, for in his visions of the future he had always seen himself as sole authority, lawgiver, and provider, but this did not make it less salutary. Rather to his own surprise, he was still alive after two years in Bandeir, but the strength sucked out of him by the cruel fever would never return, and a very brief period of persistent over-work showed him that he was suffering both in clearness of head and in temper. It was physically impossible for one man to control all the affairs of such an extensive district, so devoid of means of communication, and inhabited by such diverse and unfriendly races. Somehow or other he must contrive to divide the responsibility, and he looked about to find someone to relieve him, conscious that at first, at any rate, he must make use of the material at hand. His aristocratic ideas—he was a fervent supporter of the “Young England” view that the gentry were the natural, if not the only, leaders in any state—had to go by the board, and the second mate of the *Golden Helen* found himself administering a district at one end of Bandeir, while the surgeon, who had “rallied” to Gilbert during his illness, took charge of one at the other. Captain

Briggs held a kind of roving commission to patrol the river and the coast and keep watch against any revival of piracy, and Sansom's schooner brought stores and mails at regular intervals from Singapore, thus keeping the exiles in touch with civilisation.

Gilbert would have had no difficulty in finding posts for several more men, but of three out of those already at his disposal he was not able to make full use. Tony, as his personal friend, and therefore best acquainted with his views and aspirations, he had sent up to the tribesmen's country, to occupy the "fort" constructed by the expedition, and act as lawgiver and beneficent autocrat generally, thus bringing the wild men gradually into line with what was expected of them. But Tony was not a success as a district officer. There was no money in the job, or he might have been more reconciled to it, and he frankly hated his dusky subjects, who on their part regarded him as a sadly inadequate substitute for their beloved Datu Brinja. To take any interest in their language, customs, or folklore was beyond him, and he fell more and more into the hands of the Malays who accompanied him, with whom he led an existence much more like that of a native chief than of the upright and austere foreign ruler Gilbert had intended him to be. There was a reason for this, as he pleaded pathetically when Gilbert, paying a surprise visit to his district, descended upon him in wrath. He could not bear the isolation of the life he was supposed to lead. In the daytime he could get on pretty well by dint of devoting himself to his great poem, *Ulysses*, but at night the brooding silence and uncanny sounds of the jungle affected his nerves so much that he was driven to drown thought in drinking and gambling with his subordinates. To Gilbert his type of mind was absolutely incomprehensible. That a man with a new country and a little-known race at his doors should spend his days in writing reams of unreadable verse, and his nights in dissipation, was a mystery to him. He was not given to phrase-making, or he might have said

that Tony had the poetic temperament without poetic power, sufficient imagination to feel the spell of tropical nature, but too little to enter into the life of tropical man. What he did was to send Tony to a district nearer Bandeir, where he could look him up frequently, and despatch the promoted second mate to take his post.

Sansom and Rowton had no districts. Rowton was kept on the move, exploring the country and noting its products, much to his disgust, and when he grumbled was merely asked why he should object to doing the work he had been brought out to do. Sansom did not grumble—audibly. He knew as well as Gilbert why he remained under the latter's eye at Bandeir, ostensibly to act as interpreter, or—in case of his leader's disablement—as second in command, but neither of them put their knowledge into words. Gilbert felt a deep distrust of Sansom, Sansom a vehement hatred and contempt for Gilbert, but the moment had not arrived for an open rupture. Gilbert could not afford to buy Sansom out, Sansom had not yet obtained all the information he desired to have at his command before declaring war. Therefore he performed the duties of storekeeper and supervisor of trade—with the more willingness that he was gradually accumulating the very facts he wanted.

As to the material and moral progress of Bandeir under the new order of things, it was not particularly marked. Within the borders of the province, after several crucial examples, the tribesmen were beginning to understand that they must not raid the Malays for heads, and the Malays that aggression on the tribes was forbidden. But it was fairly certain that both kept up their old ways so far as raiding over the frontier was concerned, and Gilbert was by no means sure that the tribes were not still conducting head-hunts among themselves. The practice could not be stamped out until he could stud the country with forts, with a white man in charge of each, and he wrote urgently to his brother Charles, adjuring him

to send out as many of the right kind of men as he could get—upright, clean-living, willing to serve for a bare subsistence, and above all, gentlemen. That was the best thing about old Charles; he might not be particularly philanthropic, but he did know a gentleman when he saw one.

Matters were not much more satisfactory where trade was concerned. The mineral wealth was there, but it was extremely difficult to get at it. Not all the enticing wares brought by the *Golden Helen* and her consort could tempt the Malays to work once their simple wants were satisfied, and the tribesmen were blissfully ignorant what work—save a little light cultivation—was. Nature brought forth so abundantly what was required for food and shelter that a very slight exertion sufficed to maintain a family. Ambition, acquisitiveness, or the love of finery, might call for a further expenditure on velvet and satin garments of divers colours, gold ornaments, and a string of silken flags for decoration on high days, but these once obtained, there was no more to wish for, and the Malay much preferred to take part in boat-races, or simply paddle about the river exchanging greetings with his friends. The tribesman went out hunting or seeking honey in the jungle, or sat on the verandah of his house—possibly thinking, and possibly not. When, by dint of strenuous exhortation on Gilbert's part and exertion on Sansom's, the promise of a return cargo of antimony ore for the latter's schooner had been secured, the cargo was duly forthcoming, but on examination proved to be composed of valueless rock from the nearest point whence it could be obtained without excessive labour. Again Gilbert felt bitterly the need of more white men. Against the abuses of the old system, the extortion, fining and ill-treatment, he had set his face, but if his rule was to be of any benefit to Bandeir, sufficient revenue must be raised not only to pay the King's tribute, but to provide for needed improvements. Sansom had his remedy all ready—the introduction of Chinese labour—but Gilbert

refused to consider it save in the last resort. Not only was the influence of the Chinese demoralising where they had been already allowed admittance, but their entrance would tend to increase the natural indolence of the native inhabitants, rather than the reverse.

It must not be supposed that the outer world had remained quite oblivious of Gilbert's existence since his settlement in Bandeir. The pirate-chiefs outside his own boundaries—any that were left within them maintained a most discreet silence—were by no means indifferent to his treatment of their fellows. Messages from them—sometimes curses, sometimes threats, both of a blood-curdling character—used to be dropped into the town attached to arrows, which were shot by blow-pipes from the jungle. These were highly impressive, but Gilbert attached more importance to the persistent rumours which reached him that the pirates on either side of Bandeir had laid aside their usual differences, and were combining to organise an irresistible force, which was to sweep up the river and crush him. He disdained to show any anxiety, but it was inevitable that he should feel some, since it was not wholly impossible that the pirates might have an unofficial European backing. The Dutch authorities in the neighbouring islands had naturally taken his adventure in very bad part, and he had conducted a lively warfare on paper with the nearest. They began by thanking him politely for his services in freeing the Bandeir River of pirates, but followed this up by suggesting that the sooner he left Bandeir the better. When he replied that he had no intention of leaving Bandeir, and was settling there, they referred him to a treaty concluded between England and Holland at the close of the Napoleonic Wars. By this treaty England withdrew from her conquests in the East Indies, and engaged not to disturb the Dutch in their possessions there. The bland explanation was added that this covered the whole of the Eastern Seas. As it was precisely this contention which had originally roused Gilbert's wrath, and which he had

pledged himself to upset, he replied promptly that the treaty could not apply to territories ruled by native rulers, which were not and never had been administered by Holland. The Dutch Governor could merely reiterate that it did, and the cannonade died down into a dropping fire, each combatant sending a further letter supporting his own contention when he remembered the matter, or had time.

Since foreign politics were in this agitated condition, it may be imagined what a sensation was caused in Bandeir when one day an excited fishing-boat, her crew paddling for their lives, came tearing up the river to announce the arrival of a war-boat of the English. Presently, preceded by a pinnace taking careful soundings, Her Britannic Majesty's brig-of-war *Neæra* made her stately appearance round the bend below the town, and came to an anchor off the palace. Gilbert's house was close to the palace, and a little below it, and he was able to distinguish that the brig was cleared for action, though at present she did nothing more hostile than salute the Jhalábor flag flying from Yusuf's roof. While the Bandeir cannon were still thundering their reply, Gilbert had a sudden impulse, and acted on it with his usual impetuosity. The throng of Malay boats had fled precipitately on the arrival of the stranger, and were hiding in creeks or taking refuge under the verandahs of the houses on the river-front, but from the Residency there shot out a small boat paddled by two natives who were urged to strenuous exertion by a white man. Nothing but the terror in which they held Gilbert would have induced them to go anywhere near the man-of-war, for the population of Bandeir were recalling as one man warnings sedulously distributed among them by Dutch emissaries, to the effect that Datu Brinja, with his deceitfully peaceful methods, was merely the precursor of a British expedition which would forcibly annex the province. Gilbert knew better. Any hostility felt on board the *Neæra* was directed against

him personally, and he wished to know the worst at once.

The officers of the brig were in much the same frame of mind as the Bandeireans. They rather expected to be met with round-shot instead of salutes, and the panic-stricken flight of the civil inhabitants helped to confirm the idea that hostilities were intended. The commander had chosen his position with judgment, so as to threaten the palace and the Residency with his guns, while he himself was merely end-on to the battery on its point above the palace, and he was inclined to congratulate himself that fear, or prudence, or slackness had withheld the Bandeireans from raking the brig's deck as she came round the bend and could not defend herself. Therefore it was with something akin to stupefaction that the naval men saw the little boat dart out from the shore, and found themselves hailed by the white man in her. No treachery could be feared from the visit of a single unarmed man, and Gilbert was soon standing on the deck of the brig, a gaunt figure in white, with hollow eyes whose blueness looked unnatural against the pallor of his face. The commander looked at him in bewilderment, noted the military cut of whiskers and moustache, and came to the surprising conclusion that this must be the filibuster into whose proceedings he had been sent to enquire.

"I am addressing the commander of H. M. S. *Neæra*?"

"Do I see before me Captain Gilbert Berringer?"

The two questions snapped out simultaneously, with the usual result of an embarrassed pause. The commander smiled involuntarily, and equally involuntarily answered the question which the intruder's unsmiling eyes repeated.

"My name is Blanchard, and I have the honour to command the *Neæra*. May I ask——?"

"I am Gilbert Berringer, Administrator of Bandeir under his Majesty the King of Jhalábor. Allow me to welcome the first British warship that has visited us."

Captain Blanchard's hand was forced. It had been his intention, if he was allowed to anchor in peace, to proceed in all possible state to pay his respects to Prince Yusuf, absolutely ignoring the white man who was alleged to have established himself in possession of Bandeir, but the white man declined to be ignored. The only thing to do seemed to be to invite him down into the cabin, where matters might be discussed with less publicity. Gilbert accepted the invitation so readily, that once they were below the commander remarked with a touch of pique—

"It don't seem to occur to you, sir, that if I did my duty I should clap you in irons, and run down the river at once to carry you off to Singapore for trial."

"It certainly didn't," said Gilbert, without emotion. "When one gentleman trusts himself in the hands of another, such things don't happen."

Captain Blanchard was more and more perplexed. He had expected a torrent of explanation and self-exculpation, which might or might not afford ground for regarding what had happened in Bandeir with a friendly eye. But this gaunt shadow of a man, who seemed almost too weary to speak, accepted his attentions without embarrassment, apparently regarding them as a right. One might almost have imagined that it was he who thought he had a right to an explanation. The commander decided on frankness.

"You ain't precisely the sort of chap I expected to find," he said, when they were seated.

"No?" The filibuster did not appear to be expansive.

"What I expected"—the sailor was stung to irritation—"was the usual kind of man who takes to living native. Arrack and a seraglio and that sort of thing."

Gilbert set down his untasted glass of wine. "Sir, if you had done me the honour to visit me on shore, you would have been treated with the courtesy one gentleman shows to another. I expect to receive the same from you."

The captain pushed back his chair from the table and stared at him. An explosion was not far off, but he restrained himself and spoke stiffly. "Sir, I ask your pardon. Your rebuke was justified. But now, pray tell me who you really are."

"What were you told to expect?" asked Gilbert, with faint curiosity.

"A young rip kicked out by the Company—regular bad hat—who had got together a shipload of desperadoes, with one of the shadiest characters in Singapore to back him, and taken forcible possession of part of Jhalábor, where he was proceeding to set up a pirate state. That's about the total."

"And bad enough, ain't it? Well, you're frank, and no doubt you think I ought to be the same. But I won't tell you a thing. You go on shore and visit Yusuf, talk to his people, set your fellows to pump the Bandeireans they meet. Find out from them why I came and what I have done here. You'll get an uncommon fine assortment of answers, and you can take your choice what to believe. If the balance inclines to my side, you and your officers will be good enough to dine with me to-night—if not, you won't."

"Done with you!" said the sailor heartily. "Let me—— But your glass is full still."

"Precisely. You need not compromise yourself by extending hospitality to me until you are sure of my credentials."

"Come, come, my dear sir, I don't think I deserve that! If you knew the tales that are afloat about you!"

"I can imagine them. What exactly was your object in coming here?"

"To enquire into things—nominally. Actually—well, you must remember the story is that you and your vessel wiped out an inoffensive fleet of trading proas—I had a hint that, supposing things were as bad as all that, if I could trepan you on board and get you to Singapore, I should be protected in any legal action you might take against me."

"Dutch malice multiplied by Singapore scandal, I see. Well, make your enquiries; I say nothing."

"And if the enquiries turn out to your discredit, you'll come on board like a lamb and go quietly to Singapore?" Captain Blanchard's eyes were twinkling, but Gilbert's look drove the fun out of them.

"I have suffered and sacrificed too much for Bandeir, sir, to leave it while I am alive."

They went up on deck again, and Gilbert descended into his little boat and returned to his house. Urgent messages came to him from Yusuf, entreating him to come and take part in the reception of the naval officers, but he refused to go. His servants came in and out, muttering curiously that the sea-English must be the most inquisitive people on earth. They did nothing but ask questions, and clearly did not know that at a state reception it was absolutely improper to talk of matters of any moment. Those left on board the warship were even questioning the occupants of the many small boats which, the first fright over, were crowding under her sides to examine her more closely.

There was nothing to show Gilbert whether the result of the examination was in his favour or not until the arrival of a case of wine with Commander Blanchard's compliments. This truly early-Victorian testimony of esteem was followed by a formal call from the commander and an attendant midshipman, who came to return Gilbert's visit, while the other officers left their cards—sorely to the perplexity of the servants, who thought they must be letters, and insisted on carrying them to their master at once. At sunset all returned to dinner, much impressed by the feudal order of the household, where all dined together, seated according to their rank.

"Then I am to understand you have now no desire to deport me to Singapore?" asked Gilbert of his principal guest.

"None whatever. My only desire is to be there to see the next fight you have with the pirates, and to lend a hand."

"You needn't wait long for that. What are your orders?"

"Other than the hints of which you have heard already, merely to do what I can to put down piracy."

"Then here's your chance." Gilbert unfolded a cheerful missive shot into the town that afternoon, which promised him that he should be flayed alive and rubbed with red pepper, while all his followers should be impaled on sharp bamboos along the river bank. "I don't think this was intended to reach me while you were here, but it points the moral of the situation. If you will work with us, we can give these gentlemen a salutary lesson."

"With all my heart!" said Captain Blanchard.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS.

TONY RIDDING was weary of his life. It was not as if he had wanted to be taken on this expedition against the pirates, for he would have been quite content to remain in his district, and it was not very pleasant to know that Berringer did not care to leave him and Sansom so close to one another. Nor was it pleasant to realise that he had borne himself with such conspicuous discretion in the fighting which had already occurred that Gilbert declined to take him on further, and left him here at the advanced base. When fighting was merely a matter of imagination, Tony was such a paladin that it gave him a shock to emerge from his dreams and find himself shrinking from bullets and positively loathing the sight of cold steel. This time it was worse than before, for there were those raffish, hearty naval men all about, and Gilbert chose to take it as a personal reflection when they noticed—they could hardly help it—his friend's prudence. The expedition had so far been most successful. The two pirate communities which had coalesced and threatened to wipe out Bandeir dwelt respectively on the Reba River to the north, and the Taropan River to the south, and their preparations were not yet complete. When the *Neæra* bade a polite farewell to Bandeir, she was naturally escorted down the river by all Yusuf's war-boats, which accompanied her out of sight of land. At the river-mouth she spoke

the *Golden Helen*, and Captain Briggs immediately set sail for the southward, with orders to blockade the Taropan and bottle up the pirates there, who were the weaker of the two communities. A day or two later the Rebas, watching as usual for any prey that might offer itself, saw four or five heavily-laden trading prahus, covered in with palm-leaf roofs in the usual style, labouring past fairly far out at sea. The wind was so light that the crews were using oars as well as sails, but their progress was very slow. It was long since such a prize had appeared, and out swooped the Rebas in their swift prahus in overwhelming numbers. But the prey was not so defenceless as they thought. The thatched roofs were thrown aside or cut away, and wicked little cannon showed their noses at the bows. The crews were well armed with muskets as well as krises, and among them were a number of white men, who remained concealed until the pirates had opened fire. Nevertheless the fight was a stubborn one, for the Rebas, by sheer force of numbers, edged their foes into a land-locked bay, whence a reef of rocks made escape extremely difficult. But this triumph was their undoing, for straight in from sea, regardless of the off-shore wind, came steaming the English warship, of whose safe departure their scouts at the mouth of the Bandeir River had assured them, and the prahus which disdained to seek safety in flight were caught between two fires.

Among the rowers of the pirate boats were captives from other tribes who had been enslaved by the Rebas, and these were delighted to guide the *Neæra* up the river to the pirate stronghold. Attack in boats had been provided against by all kinds of obstacles along the bank—sunken vessels, jagged logs, bamboo *chevaux de frise* hidden under water—and even the released prisoners would have found it difficult to indicate the safe course to the foreshore; but the *Neæra*, lying in mid-stream, battered the fort with her guns at her leisure, little inconvenienced by the frenzied efforts of the pirates to reply. They had a number of guns

of varied calibre, mostly obtained out of captured merchantmen, but their powder was bad and their marksmanship execrable. Captain Blanchard was minded to send his boats on shore when the fire began to slacken, and cut off the retreat of the pirates at the rear of the fort, but Gilbert protested. He had no desire to exterminate these people, merely to impose peace on them, and once his Malays were let loose there would be little chance of even the women and children's escaping. Much to Captain Blanchard's distress, he insisted on rowing nearer the fort with a flag of truce, and offering terms. The pirates had had enough of it, evidently; the chief on the river side of the stronghold listened politely to the white man's requirements, and withdrew to acquaint his leader with them, and Gilbert waited for the answer. Waited until Captain Blanchard hailed him from the ship.

"What's up? Are you sure they ain't bamboozling you? There are very few men left on the wall."

It was too true. Under cover of the negotiations, the pirates were leaving the fort with such possessions as they could carry, and finding safe shelter in the dense jungle at the rear, and when the bluejackets and Bandeir men landed, the only living creatures left in the stronghold were some unfortunate slaves of the Reba chief, who had not been able to carry off their loads. There was a good deal of chaff that night at Gilbert's expense—not all of it pleasant, but he held his ground firmly. Any one could exterminate pirates; Yusuf and his father could have done it had they possessed the necessary energy; but he had no intention of making a solitude and calling it peace. What he wished was to exterminate piracy—by force, if necessary—but to divert the energies of the pirates, even against their will, to peaceful pursuits. He was willing to admit that his intervention ought to have been backed by a force commanding the rear of the fort, but he could not regret what he had done, though it involved much further hard work for himself and the rest of the expedition.

This it was that led to Tony's being marooned in the desolate spot where two smaller rivers united to form the Reba. The main stream itself was unsurveyed, and Captain Blanchard thought it wiser not to take the *Neæra* up. She was to cruise off the river-mouth and look in daily, while he took a force up in boats. The released prisoners knew that the pirates had a further stronghold in the heart of their country, but whether it stood on the Red or the Black Reba they could not say. Therefore, when the junction of the two tributaries was reached, and the streams proved to be wide and shallow and encumbered with snags, it was decided only to take the smaller and lighter vessels of the flotilla. With the help of boats captured from the pirates, it was found possible to get the whole force on board, with a little crowding, and English and Malays were divided, Gilbert going up the Red Reba with half his own men and the second lieutenant of the *Neæra* in command of a party of seamen, and Captain Blanchard taking the Black Reba, with Gilbert's old acquaintance Abubakr to lead his detachment of Bandeireans. The two forces were to keep in touch as far as possible by semaphoring at fixed times of day from the tallest trees they could find, but the leaders realised that in all probability they would be forced to act independently, and they laid their plans accordingly.

With the departure of the force exceeding boredom descended upon the hapless two who were left in charge of the boatkeepers at the junction of the streams. The seamen did not appear to mind much, since any change from life on shipboard seemed to please them, and the Malays were perfectly happy with unlimited fishing and nothing else to do. But Tony was very much the reverse. His fellow-captive was an elderly master's mate, sardonic by nature and soured by long delay in obtaining promotion, and whether he despised Tony more for writing poetry or for his tendency to take a back seat at a fight it would be difficult to say. They must not both leave the

boats at once, but either of them might take two or three men and a gun and try for wild pig in the jungle, and the mate took full advantage of this licence when he found his companion did not care for it. There was a certain pleasure in being free of his contemptuous eye, but when a swift messenger-boat came down the Black Reba with Captain Blanchard's orders that the *Neæra's* boats were to follow him up, since the river had been found practicable for them, the liberty thus gained was no happiness to Tony. Once again he fell under the obsession of the jungle—in the sweltering noonday heat when the eye could distinctly see forms move where no forms were, in the green haze beyond the glaring strip of sunlit water, at night when the air was full of whispers, and weird cries sent his heart into his mouth. It was all very well to say that the whispering was merely the gentle swishing of the upper branches of the trees, and that the unearthly voices were those of wild animals and night birds—they might be and they might not. A sudden violent splash in the water close at hand might be only a boar disturbed in swimming across the river, but it might be an alligator, or it might mean a pirate attack. In short, Tony was in a very fine state of nerves, and his nervousness quickly communicated itself to his Malay companions. They had confidence—or said they had—in the spells with which they had come provided for keeping off the evil spirits which roamed the jungle at night, but who could concoct a spell that would keep off pirates?

Thus the train was laid ready for a panic when one evening a small boat, paddled by two or three exhausted men, struggled down the Red Reba, the crew making desperate efforts to reach the base by sunset. So worn and weary and terrified were they that Tony's men hardly recognised them at first, but one of them was a minor chief who had accompanied Gilbert, and the others were two of his followers. They brought the news of the entire annihilation of the force under Gilbert's command. The pirates had blocked the river with an elaborately constructed boom, and after

cutting through it under a heavy fire, the boats had found themselves jammed in a mass of logs and rafts which made progress almost hopeless, while bullets, poisoned arrows, and spears rained down upon them from the banks, and the pirate boats cut off their retreat. The three fugitives had fought their way along the remains of the boom and seized upon an empty boat, in which they had fled for their lives, pursued by the exulting pirates. Datu Brinja and his companions, white and brown alike, had been killed, or, if a few sorely wounded had survived, they had fallen into the hands of the pirates, and were now far beyond the hope of rescue.

Beyond the hope of rescue? Yes, but there was no question of rescue. Tony had known it as soon as the weak voices of the fugitives gasped out the first tidings of disaster, and before the tale was told his fingers were working feverishly at the mooring-rope of his own boat. The pirates were at hand, flushed with victory; if he and his men desired to escape the gruesome fate prophesied for all Datu Brinja's followers, they must be gone at once. The boat he occupied was Gilbert's own, built under his eye and renowned for her speed; with any luck she could distance the pirate vessels. There was infinite comfort in the fact that the Malays divined his thought, and shared it. There had been a furtive glance or two at him at first, as though they had a sneaking fear that he might prefer resistance to flight, but his action told its own tale, and they came hurrying on board and helped to get the boat out from among the others. The fugitive chief was responsible for the happy thought that the rest of the boats should be left moored together, with lights burning under their thatched roofs, that the pirates might be deceived into making a cautious and belated approach instead of dashing on them at once, and Tony forced himself to endure the slight delay while the mooring-ropes were rearranged so as not to show a gap where the *Star of Peace* had lain. Then at last they were off, swept

along by the current, yet rowing as well, in their frenzied eagerness to escape beyond the ken of the foe whose paddles they fancied they could already hear.

Morning brought an increase of toil, for they met the in-coming tide, and hard as they rowed against it, their progress seemed infinitesimal. Their eyes were continually on the dark reaches behind them, fearing to distinguish the bunch of plumes at the bow of a pirate boat emerging from the shadows, and when one man timidly suggested that they should land and cook their rice, the rest scouted the idea fiercely. Once they paused, and only once, where an island covered with fruit-laden trees stood in mid-stream. The fruit had ripened since the passing of the expedition, and three or four men threw themselves on shore and hacked off branches with their krises, hurling them into the boat. Then on they went again, passing at high noon the ashes and ruined walls—over which the jungle was already creeping—of the pirate stronghold, and at last the tide turned, and they laid in their oars with a gasp of relief. The *Neæra* was not to be seen when they reached the river-mouth, and Tony was not sorry. To board her would have meant delay, questioning, possibly even an enforced return up that frightful Reba, when his whole soul was set on regaining the comparative safety of Bandeir. Hitherto all his thoughts had been engrossed by the imperative necessity of flight—of escape from that ghastly danger which was coming on with grim strides behind. Now, when with sail set the *Star of Peace* was running down the coast, he had leisure—since the pirates were little likely to risk the cruiser's catching them in the open sea—to reflect on the events of the past strenuous twenty-four hours. No, he ought not to have insisted on remaining at his post—far less on following in the track of the ill-fated force up the Red Reba. Gilbert would have done it—quite possibly, but Gilbert was a mad fool, with no care for his life. What good could it possibly have done, other than add twenty additional names to the list of the pirates' victims? And that

meant torture—the most refined tortures that could be invented by a vindictive and naturally cruel race. Tony's frame twitched as he recalled some of the achievements described to him by his own Malays—and they spoke with admiring respect of the Rebas as past masters in the art, whom lesser men could not hope to rival. It was absurd thinking of it. He could have done nothing by going back, and it was better not to dwell on Gilbert's fate. No doubt he had been killed in the fighting—or at any rate it was pleasanter to suppose so.

Pale under the grime accumulated during his exertions, his white clothes torn and discoloured, Tony staggered at last up the ladder of the Residency, and presented to Sansom the lively image of a ghost.

"What the——?" began Sansom, his hair rising, as with one wild bound he placed his chair between himself and his visitant.

Tony spoke thickly. "Berringer—all—wiped out. Pirates after us. Brandy!" he dropped into the chair and collapsed. A ruthless hand on his shoulder shook him back to some measure of consciousness.

"What's that you say? Steady that fool tongue of yours——" as Tony babbled feebly. "Did you say Berringer was killed?"

"Yes—Berringer—all——" murmured Tony, and lost consciousness again. When he woke, after what seemed unending ages of nightmare, punctuated by intervals of uncomfortable sleep, he was in bed, and at the foot, under the mosquito-net, stood Sansom, regarding him with a distinctly unamiable expression. He jumped up with a yell.

"That'll do," said Sansom curtly. "You have slept like a pig long enough, my boy. Now get up and pull your senses together, and come and do what has to be done before those abominable sailors are upon us."

"Which?" asked Tony weakly.

"Either—I ain't particular—Briggs or the cruiser. Come, stir your stumps. You and I have to get

things into our own hands before the news of Berringer's death gets about."

"But—the men—who escaped with me?"

"All safe under lock and key. I saw to that. Didn't want them blabbing before it was convenient. Had them all in quod before you could say Jack Robinson, and gave out that Berringer had sent them back for punishment. Desperate characters—guard instructed to fire if they attempt to open conversation. But so far they have been much too fagged to do anything but sleep—like you. Can't spare you any more precious time now, so hurry. By the bye, I suppose there's no doubt Berringer *is* dead?"

"I didn't see it, of course. But the men said—and I heard the pirates coming after us myself."

"Well, if he ain't dead, it's not your fault. No efforts spared to bring about the desirable result—eh?" he grinned disagreeably. "Now take a bath and clear your head, eat and drink what I send in for you, and then come to me on the office verandah."

"I don't know what you mean by giving me orders in this style," blustered Tony feebly. "Who are you, pray?"

"I'm your master, my boy, and don't you forget it. I can make your fortune, and I will, if you show yourself amenable. And if you don't, I'll make you ashamed to show your face in any Christian country. So be quick. I'll allow you half an hour—no more."

Tony kept up his spirits as he dressed by further private bluster. He was not going to be spoken to in this way—not he. Who was Sansom that he should thrust himself forward? Merely a business connection, and not a very satisfactory one. Whereas he, Antony Ridding, was Gilbert's old schoolfellow and closest friend. Of course it was for him to take the lead, to lay down the lines on which things should be done in future. And having come to this inspiring conclusion, he cuffed his Chinese boy for a smear on a shirt, and swaggered across the reception-hall to the verandah at the back of the house. But

Sansom, who was sitting at Gilbert's desk, brought from his cabin in the *Golden Helen*, barely raised his eyes to greet him.

"Ages you have been!" he growled irritably. "This sort of thing won't do in future, please to remember. I particularly wanted to get matters settled before the light went, so that I could call upon Yusuf at sunset. Well, I've taken the liberty of going through our lamented friend's possessions. Nothing interesting"—he winked—"except the daguerreotype of a strikingly plain young female with staring eyes. Know her?"—he tossed an oval frame across the table.

"Parson's daughter down in our village. Must have stole the thing from his sister," replied Tony, unconsciously adopting the other's tone. "Never could see anything in her myself. He used to be sweet on her, but when he settled here I understood that it was all off."

"So much the better. We don't want any relatives imagining that they have claims on the estate, and taking it into their heads to spy upon us. What we have a right to expect is a free hand in carrying on what we have begun, and getting back some return for all the money put into *Bandeir*."

"But he—Berringer—put in more than either of us."

"I beg your pardon. Our shares were equal—one no more and no less than another, you'll be good enough to remember."

"But the money he got from his grandmother—it was seven thousand, I know; he told me."

"And what did he do with it? Bought a perfectly useless ship, and dragged her here to add to expenses. No, the *Golden Helen* can go back where she came from, and old Briggs and his lot too. You and I, as the surviving partners, have naturally a controlling interest in things now, but we have no objection whatever to the appointment of a representative of Berringer's family in his place. We have no reason to be afraid of investigation—everything open and above-board."

"But we have nothing to show for our three thousand apiece——"

"Four thousand, if you please, I have every item down in black and white. What you have, I don't know, but you needn't be afraid I shall dispute your accounts. Our late friend's gentlemanly way of carrying on business ain't altogether inconvenient for his successors. Give you my word, the only record I found of our transactions was an old pencil memorandum suggesting various proportions of shares—and ending up with what I say, all equal."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Make my fortune and yours, as I said—and a fortune for Berringer's people too, so that they ain't tempted to cut up rough about my taking things in hand. Who did old Ismail make administrator of Bandeir, I ask you?"

"Poor Berringer."

"Don't *poor* him, pray. You left him to die, you know. No, the grant was not made to Berringer, but to Berringer and his two partners—our noble selves."

"The deed is most distinctly made out in his name alone. Why, you must have seen that yourself. They ain't likely to continue it to us."

"Oh, ain't they? We'll see. It's your business to square Yusuf, with all the necessary talkee-talkee about his friend and his friend's wishes, and how often he said to you with a bursting sigh, 'If only I knew I was leaving Bandeir to the care of my friends Ridding and Sansom, I wouldn't mind how soon I cut my stick.'"

"But," urged Tony, bewildered, "that was not his idea at all. I am almost sure he left something——"

"He did—a manifesto as long as your arm, breathing the most noble sentiments, addressed to his country, and bequeathing her his work in Bandeir to carry on on his lines. But I wasn't born yesterday, and I took the precaution of making that right as

soon as I came across it. Otherwise it might have been inconvenient—not that the country would have accepted the legacy, though.”

“But you don’t think the King will continue the grant?”

“I know he will—if we promise him a slightly larger tribute. He don’t care how we raise it, happily, and we can tighten things up in every direction. I can have a thousand Chinese at work in a month, and then I’ll arrange with the tribes for a supply of labourers from the interior. They’ll soon give up head-hunting when they find prisoners are more profitable.”

“Slaves?” asked Tony, with something of awe.

“Certainly not—labourers. No one can speak their language, so who’s to tell they ain’t here of their own free will? When the sharp ones have picked up a little Malay, give ’em a waistcloth and a whip apiece, and set ’em over the fresh lot as they come in. We are going to take a leaf out of the Dutch planters’ book, my dear sir.”

“It sounds very dangerous. I hardly think——”

“Oh yes, you will. I have the whip-hand of you, my hero. Just you smother those scruples of yours if you don’t want to be hounded from port to port with the story of how you left your friend to be murdered.”

“I didn’t leave him—he was murdered——” stammered the wretched Tony.

“So you say. But your—accomplice—Salih, will be only too pleased to swear that he brought you an urgent message from Berringer demanding help, and that you refused to listen, and insisted on escaping at once.”

“But I sent no message demanding help,” said a voice from behind them. Both turned with white faces. In the doorway stood Gilbert, with a crowd of eager, excited Malays behind him. Sansom recovered himself first.

“I wonder how long this *gentleman* has been listening to our conversation,” he said.

"Long enough to hear you proposing to introduce slavery in Bandeir, you hound. You will go down the river to-morrow morning, and the *Golden Helen* will take you back to Singapore, which you should never have left."

"And that little matter of four thousand pounds?" sneered Sansom.

"Four thousand, is it that now? It shall be paid you—not that you deserve it, but because I am a gentleman, though you presume to doubt it. Go to your quarters, sir, or I vow I'll send you on board the *Neæra* in irons."

"Commander Blanchard might possibly demand stronger evidence than the hearsay of an eaves-dropper," said Sansom smoothly, but he obeyed. Gilbert turned to Tony, who stood mute and guilty.

"I suppose it's unnecessary for me to tell you that Bandeir won't hold you and me after this?" he said. "Heavens, Tony! how could you do it? Sansom is different, but you! I was warned against you, but I trusted you—I trusted you—— What's this?" he pounced on Lettice's insulted portrait, and gathered it protectingly into his hand. "You miserable pair of thieves, what have you been doing with my things?"

"Nothing—we had to decide about sending them home," faltered Tony. "Is there nothing—can't you give me——?"

"Another chance? Never! Not in Bandeir, at any rate. You go back to civilisation, Tony. I ought never to have brought you out here, but I thought—I declare," he cried suddenly, not to Tony, "there's only one friend I can trust in the wide world, and I have vowed to have nothing more to do with her!"

CHAPTER X.

FALLENTIS SEMITA VITÆ.

LETTICE enjoyed a good deal of quiet happiness at this time. Her tracts—with an occasional exception—continued to find favour with Mr Richer and his customers, and if her father had a new weapon to his hand in the grave remark, “I could wish to see you fulfilling your home duties in a proper spirit, Laetitia, rather than attempting to teach other people,” that was only to be expected. Had she been going to marry Gilbert, Mr Tourneur would have made her last days at the Rectory miserable by observing that she was very ready to discharge elsewhere the duties she had performed so reluctantly at home, for it was his theory that constant blame alone kept people up to their work. But his undeserved strictures fell lightly when she had not only the pleasure of the work itself to sustain her, but the munificent guinea which rewarded each achievement. She felt guiltily that she was overpaid, since she would have gone on writing gladly for the mere joy of doing it, but there was an extraordinary triumph in laying up guinea after guinea of her very own. She was not miserly by nature, but never having had anything to spend, she found it difficult to acquire the art all at once—even had the Abbotsbridge shops offered more scope for it than they did. She bought a cap for Rebecca and a suitably “useful” ribbon for the Sunday bonnet of Rebecca’s little underling Jerusha, and for Aunt Sophy a pair of

real lace mittens, which filled the old lady with mingled pride and consternation. Her own modest wants—a good supply of writing materials, and a pair of kid gloves, the first she had possessed, to pay calls in—were easily supplied, and Aunt Sophy, to whom she had timidly broached the project, rejected aghast the wild idea that her niece might take in a weekly or monthly magazine on her own account. Such an extravagance would be on a par with the buying of books—utterly indefensible and unprofitable—and Lettice acquiesced reluctantly. Miss Tourneur's advice, reiterated with a persistency that spoke volumes for the bitter experience from which it sprang, was that Lettice must lay by a little nest-egg and tell no one about it. The comfort of such a store, amassed without the knowledge of the head of the house, was, so the old lady averred, incalculable. "You know I would never utter a word against your good Papa, my dear, but the gentlemen, even the best of them, are apt to be just a little trying when they are asked for money, even for the most necessary things." An old stocking was, of course, the proper receptacle, but Aunt Sophy produced a little scrap of brocade which had formed part of her grandmother's wedding-gown, and with her own trembling old hands made a bag to hold the money. She would have had Lettice always to carry it about with her, but Lettice had greater faith in the honesty of her neighbours, and thought that a hollow contrived at the back of the pile of papers in her cupboard was hiding-place enough.

Little by little the authorship of her tracts was brought home to Lettice. One of them dealt with a catastrophe which had made much sensation in the Abbotsbridge part of the country, when two men digging for flints had been overwhelmed by a fall of chalk, and the unrestrained pride of Miss Tourneur and Mrs Akehurst inevitably led to suspicion. But it was Theodosia who made the secret public. Theodosia, informed of course by Aunt Sophy, was graciously pleased to approve of the tract-writing, for it fitted

into the scheme of life she had designed for Lettice. Young Mrs Berringer's far-seeing mind settled very early the fortunes of her brother and sisters. Emily was to make a good marriage—as good as or even better than her own, and Peter, when he had reached years of stability and discretion, was to be assisted by his family to purchase a ship—the family retaining a direct interest in the vessel, in case Peter's stability and discretion should be only temporary. Lettice was from the first marked off for good works, since it was obviously absurd to suppose that Gilbert's boyish fancy would last when he had seen the world and come in contact with really attractive women. The writing of tracts was eminently a good work, and Theodosia even viewed it with a certain relief. She had always felt that Lettice was not easy to fathom. There was something about her—a reserve which defied the elder sister to pierce it—which made Theodosia uncomfortable. If Lettice should ever take the bit in her teeth, there was a fund of strength—obstinacy, Theodosia called it—in her character that might make things very awkward for her family. This it was that had made Theodosia urge her father to send Lettice to the Clergy Daughters' School, instead of allowing her to borrow unsuitable books from Mr Donnellan and grow up a blue-stocking, and she felt that events had entirely justified her prevision. To write tracts anonymously was an accomplishment eminently befitting a female and a sound Churchwoman, and when the Bishop was dining with her, Theodosia informed him with exemplary modesty that the tract, "The Missionary Basket," which he had just been pleased to commend, was written by her sister. The Bishop was a kind elderly man with daughters of his own, and when next he held a confirmation in Abbotsbridge he singled out the blushing Lettice in the crowd of clergy wives and daughters after lunch in the Town Hall, and spoke words of praise which made her desire to sink into the earth. There was little fear that the episcopal notice would foster undue self-complacency when a dear

friend was careful to inform Aunt Sophy, that Mrs Berringer of the Hall said she had never heard of such shocking presumption—a little nobody like Lettice Tourneur setting herself up to teach her betters! But far more bitter were the words Lettice herself heard her father utter in reply to the Bishop's courteous remark that he must find the society of his gifted daughter a great resource in his country solitude—"Indeed, my lord, I assure you the poor dear girl has not a word to say for herself except on parish matters. Such gifts as she may possess ain't lavished on the entertainment of her own family."

The reproach was true, and Lettice knew it. In after years she was inclined to think that at this time her father and she were nearer together than at any other, that if he could have restrained his sarcastic tongue, and she thrown aside her deep reserve—in fact, if both could have altered their natures—the barrier between them might have broken down. He showed sufficient interest in her concerns to enquire when the next tract was coming out; but when, with a fear and trembling hardly to be imagined by those who have not found themselves in her case, she bought him a paper-knife and put it on his table, he called her to the study and told her coldly that woman's inveterate tendency to waste her money on useless articles was a conclusive argument against her possessing any. He had a paper-knife already, and she ought to have known he would never use any other. Restraining a wicked desire to break the ivory knife in pieces and throw it on the floor, she took it up and retired abashed. After all, it would be a comfort to have a paper-knife of her own, since scissors were unsatisfactory for cutting paper.

On the other hand, when Mr Tourneur went so far as to select a book or two from his congested shelves and lend them to Lettice that she might improve her mind, it was she who failed to rise to the occasion. Her father's object was "to keep her low and wise," and if she had doubted this, his invitation to discuss

with him what she had read would have proved it. His idea of a discussion was a series of pronouncements on his part, ending in the willing and wondering surrender of his antagonist. And Lettice declined to surrender. Silence was an art painfully acquired, she was always ready to cease asserting her own views, but Mr Tourneur demanded more. Before he could quit the subject happily, he must have an open and unreserved confession of agreement, and that Lettice could not always give. Some obstinacy there may have been in her attitude—her father told her so at length—but there was much honesty, and since the principle of “live and let live” was anathema to him, she endured a good deal of scathing sarcasm. This did not concern her views alone, for in the course of the long walks to outlying hamlets, during which these conversations generally took place, Mr Tourneur relieved his mind on any subject that occurred to him. Lettice’s clothes, her way of walking, her rough country shoes, her speech, her silence, what she had said or what she had not said at the house just left—all were mercilessly criticised until she was tingling with wounded feeling. It was as though there were some mocking devil in the man, guiding him to precisely the raw places where a flick would hurt most, and Lettice wondered dumbly at his cruelty. She knew him to be a gentleman, a scholar, a man of most finished manners, the terror of evil-doers in all ranks, and a welcome guest at all the great houses round, and it was not for years yet that she was to become aware of the secret smart which impelled him to make others suffer even as he did. Was it to be wondered at that in self-defence she would plunge at the very outset of the walk into parish matters, and plunge deeper and deeper so long as her father would consent to follow her lead? The only other alternative—the avoidance of these walks altogether—would have exposed her to such bitter reproach that she durst not try to take it.

Presently a new form of literary activity presented itself. Mr Richer projected a series of booklets upon

the duties of young servants—such as all the clergymen's wives who patronised him desired for the elder girls in their schools—to be collected into a volume when complete, and he pitched upon Lettice to write it. She accepted the task with far less diffidence than she had felt in beginning her tracts, for if there was any subject in which—thanks to Aunt Sophy and Rebecca—she was both practically and theoretically versed, it was household work. The series appeared under the general title of 'The Youthful Domestic,' and took the form of questions asked by an omniscient and highly efficient mistress of a succession of almost equally accomplished servant-girls. If the mistress was unfortunate in having so many changes in her establishment, she was to be congratulated on the paragons she found to fill the vacancies—knowing everything, from the proper usage of letters found lying about to the conduct of the family wash. It was unfortunate that the first number met with some disfavour on the ground that the youthful domestic used bad grammar and vulgar expressions, such as would prevent her from elevating as she ought those in whose hands her history was placed. Lettice had written the booklet in a fine glow of inspiration, making the girl talk precisely as Jerusha and her fellows talked, and it was very damping to have to write all the rest in fine book-English, and even to revise the first for the volume. Kind Mrs Akehurst comforted her with the reflection that the broad Sussex dialect would have tended to limit the book's usefulness, but she was not satisfied. Servant-girls did not talk like that—and she was not even sure that she wished them to do so—so that there was a kind of dishonesty in making out that they did.

But if the book was disappointing, its reward was not. Ten whole guineas did Lettice receive for her twelve booklets and their revised volume form, and now nothing could withhold her from realising what had long been her earnest desire, and giving Aunt Sophy a new black silk gown, with a skirt full enough

to be fashionable, instead of the scanty and threadbare satin—the material as hopelessly out of date as the making—which the old lady had worn on Sundays for thirty years. So overwhelming was the shock of receiving such a present that even Miss Tourneur could raise her voice only feebly against the amazing proposal with which Lettice followed it—that Rebecca's niece, who was a mantua-maker in Abbotsbridge, should come to the Rectory and make it up. The amount of needlework accomplished in every middle-class family in those days before sewing-machines would appear incredible at the present time. Be it remembered that not even a handkerchief could be bought ready-made, and that the Rectory ladies made all their own clothes of every description—covering slippers and plaiting straw bonnets among the rest. Emily trimmed the bonnets when she was at home, and in the mood, and in an obliging temper. The three conditions were not often satisfied all at once, but the bows Emily could produce with a carefully washed and pressed last year's ribbon were so infinitely superior in effect to her aunt's and Lettice's that they preferred to wait for her, and to do a good deal of her plain work in return for her aid in disguising faded patches. But the present occasion was sufficient justification for incurring the expense of professional assistance, and Rebecca's niece surpassed herself by contriving a drawn silk bonnet out of the pieces left from the gown. Such bonnets had long gone out of fashion in London, but in the country they were still largely worn by old ladies, and it was a proud Sunday when Miss Tourneur entered the church on her nephew's arm—he always conducted her punctiliously to her pew before going to the vestry—in all her glory. The gown, and the bonnet, and the mittens, had their splendours enhanced by a precious shawl of white china crape which had hardly seen the light since it was brought home, with a carved ivory fan, and presented to his sister's dearest friend by young Lieutenant Housman, who fell at the Battle of

the Nile the year after. Mrs Berringer's face was a sight to behold—as Lettice beheld it when she came in with the school-children, to sit with them near the barrel-organ which led the singing—and it was no surprise to hear her say tartly in the churchyard after service, “Well, Miss Tourneur, I could hardly believe my eyes! To see you come into church dressed out in a silk fine enough for a Duchess!” Poor Miss Tourneur's pleasure was a little dashed. Her weak kindly lips faltered in the attempt at a reply which should at the same moment rebuke her tyrant and redound to the glory of Lettice, but happily Mr Tourneur was at hand. “Too good for many a duchess, ma'am, but not one whit too good for the wearer!” he said, offering his arm to his aunt in his courtly way, and conducted her back to the Rectory in triumph.

It was not often that Mrs Berringer gave vent to her irritation—even when so deeply provoked—in public, but on this occasion her spirit was already sorely wounded. Lettice had guessed it even before she met the deprecating glances of the Squire, standing shamefaced beside his wife, and of Agnes, who made no motion to join her friend. Agnes had looked pale until the red flashed into her face at her mother's words, her blue eyes were heavy as if with weeping, and she had not been near the Rectory for a fortnight. Lettice guessed that the combat over Mr Donnellan had been renewed, and that the Squire, with a courage really akin to heroism, was supporting his daughter against his wife. Perhaps the scene in the churchyard brought matters to a crisis, for the next morning Agnes ran down to the Rectory, her fair face aglow with happiness and her bonnet all awry, to tell Lettice that her lover had been promised a London living, and Papa and Mamma had given their consent to a speedy marriage. It was not till afterwards that Lettice heard, by way of Aunt Sophy and Rebecca, that there had been a dreadful scene at the Hall on the return from church, and that Mrs

Berringer had been two hours in hysterics before she finally withdrew her opposition. Even then, the utmost she could bring herself to promise was that she would not fail in her duty, and her household opined that Mr Donnellan would not have too easy a time of it when he appeared, but for Agnes the mere fact that the obstacle was removed was enough. Even Lettice had hardly guessed the passionate affection which was hidden under her friend's calm exterior. That it could be the gentle Agnes who poured forth such raptures of delight was an astonishment that bade fair to interfere seriously with Lettice's unromantic task of "topping and tailing" gooseberries for jam. The bowl in her lap remained disgracefully empty while she sat and scanned her friend's face with eager, observant eyes.

"But, dearest Agnes," she said at last, "I never guessed you cared so much. Was it kind to say nothing to me? I could at least have offered you my sympathy."

"Was it unkind?" asked Agnes, her face falling. "Nay, dear Lettice, don't say that! I dared not talk of it. I was forced to keep it back," she pressed both hands hard upon her breast, "for had I given my feelings vent, I could not have lived through these three years."

"My dear girl, you are like a heroine in a book!" said Lettice, much impressed, and not a little humbled. Her own love-story seemed very inadequate beside this one. It would have been no use to say she could not live without Gilbert, because the hard fact remained that she had to. Moreover, she had—not by her own wish, it is true—spoken of him many times with Agnes, but never with the ecstatic adoration evident in Agnes's voice when she spoke of her dear Edward. She was painfully aware that she knew Gilbert had faults, that she thought him foolish in some ways and wrong in others, that if she had been told all the obstacles to their marrying were suddenly removed, she would have felt at least as strong a sense of responsibility as of

pleasure. And yet—if he had stood before her at this moment, and bidden her come and share his work, how gladly would she have gone! She half rose from her seat, and Agnes, waking from a blissful reverie, saved the bowl with its scanty freight of gooseberries from imminent destruction. Her thoughts had evidently taken the same direction as her friend's.

"Oh, Lettice!" she said. "If only you could be as happy as I am! If only poor dear Gilbert——"

But Lettice had herself in hand again by this time. "I have put Gilbert out of my mind, Aggie," she said, and hoped that she was speaking the truth.

"Yes, I know. I did that too. Only, of course, dear Edward was never really out of my mind. He couldn't be. And if you and Gilbert love one another——"

Lettice rose, this time holding the bowl carefully in both hands. "Agnes," she said, with lips that she tried vainly to keep from trembling, "this is not kind—not right or wise. You know that Gilbert deliberately put me out of his life. About his mind I cannot tell. It's no use pretending I was not miserable at first, for you know I was. But I have tried hard to become interested in other things, and if I have succeeded, if I have found contentment in doing my duty, do you think it the part of a friend to seek to drag me back to my first unhappy state?"

"Forgive me, dearest." Tears were in the blue eyes. "But I know that Gilbert has not forgotten——"

"Has he ever, once, asked after me in his letters?" demanded Lettice bluntly.

"No-o," reluctantly. "But," with reviving cheerfulness, "I always tell him all about you in mine."

Lettice set down the bowl on the chair where she had been sitting, and looked at Agnes gravely, rebukingly. "It would have been kind to spare me that, Agnes," she said. "I hear Aunt Sophy coming. I will leave you to her," and she was gone before Agnes could explain incoherently that she was quite sure if Gilbert

had not wanted to hear about Lettice he would have said so. She reappeared when her friend had told her joyful tale to Miss Tourneur, and was on the point of departure, kissed her quietly, wished her joy, and apologised if she had been rude, but not even Agnes durst open the subject again.

A day or two afterwards, when Lettice was walking back from Abbotsbridge, the Squire overtook her. He was still her champion, as in the old days, and he dismounted and walked beside her, leading his horse, and talking rather disconnectedly of Agnes's happiness and the visit which Edward Donnellan was to pay to the Hall. Then, as though he had been plucking up his courage for the effort, he burst out—

"So you have quite done with poor Gilbert—eh?"

Lettice felt unaccountably guilty, which was most unreasonable in the circumstances. "It was not my fault," she said with spirit.

"Quite so, quite so. Put him right out of your mind—eh?"

"I pray for him," said Lettice, and blushed scarlet. What could have induced her to say it she could not imagine.

"I'm glad of that. I think he needs it, Lettice."

"Why — is there any bad news?" she asked tremulously.

"Not precisely bad, but it ain't good. He hints at sending Ridding home—says he is unsuited to the work out there."

"But that is good news!" cried out Lettice. "Tony Ridding is nothing but a broken reed. He is fond of Gilbert, but that would not make him loyal. It isn't in him."

The Squire looked at her with something of respect. "You seem to have judged him better than Gilbert did. But at any rate the poor fellow is sadly unhappy about it—says he has no friends left. But a good little woman praying for him at home he ought to value more than many friends."

"I am not good," said Lettice, with sudden passion. She stood still in the road and faced Gilbert's father. "If I could forget all about Gilbert I would, but somehow—I can't. And I know I shall never leave off praying for him. Good-bye, I am going home by the fields."

It was a hasty and undignified ending, and she was across the stile and hidden by the hedge before the Squire could speak. Glancing backwards as she mounted a rise she saw him over the bushes staring after her, and laughed through the tears which she had been determined to hide. She had known long ago that Agnes had told her father of Gilbert's defection, but never by word or deed had he betrayed his knowledge of the fact till to-day. That he would welcome her as a daughter-in-law she knew, and there was something ironical in the thought that it was Gilbert who hung back. It made her angry, as it always did when she allowed herself to return to it, and she dashed away her tears with great determination. Why should people be so set on bringing Gilbert back to her mind when she had almost succeeded in weaning her thoughts from him? Besides, it was useless, since even if he returned repentant she was as much needed at home as ever she had been, and could not possibly marry him. She must follow her usual plan, and resolutely think of something else. If her work was not enthralling enough, there was her childhood's refuge, that enchanted world in which she had lived a dozen lives, and sustained innumerable characters while to all appearance virtuously occupied with an afternoon's sewing. This dream-world was not entered so often nowadays, since many of its romances centred round Gilbert, and were stale and flat without him, but when a change from everyday life was necessary, his place was taken by any public personage for whom Lettice had conceived an admiration. The young Queen and Prince Albert figured largely in these dreams, Lettice tramping to London, through frightful dangers, to warn them of a con-

spiracy, or—when they were fleeing for their lives from a revolution—guiding them by secret paths to hiding-places in the Downs, and supplying them with food at infinite risk. Of course the dream-Lettice was never shy or tongue-tied, or preoccupied with her own thoughts when suddenly addressed, but displayed always that readiness of reply which in real life only suggests itself when the conversation is recalled some hours after. In vision she was always prepared with the soft answer—so sadly to seek when actually called for—which would at the same time turn away her father's wrath and show him how he had misjudged her, and with a spirited and dignified reply when Mrs Berringer asked her before a roomful of company, "And how have you been amusing yourself to-day, Lettice?" In practice, alas! she must stammeringly and blushingly confess that she had been helping to make black currant jelly all morning, and turning Aunt Sophy's linsey winter gown in the afternoon.

CHAPTER XI.

A STEP IN ADVANCE.

MR RICHER had a new project in hand. 'The Youthful Domestic' had met with so much favour that he was moved to bring out a companion volume dealing with elementary teaching. In each parish at that time the more advanced girls in the National School, austere neat with white pinafores and short hair, acted as "monitresses," and from their ranks were recruited the schoolmistresses of the next generation of children. A favoured few received actual training for their work, but training colleges were far to seek, and it was only in a limited number of cases that friends or patrons came forward to pay the necessary fees. The large majority of teachers were either "reduced" gentlewomen, whose gentility was supposed to compensate for their technical inefficiency, or had picked up a practical acquaintance with the craft by dint of serving in a large school as assistant. These were often highly capable women, inured by hard experience to dealing with emergencies unimaginable nowadays, but their knowledge was naturally of the rule-of-thumb order, and zealous clergymen's wives were anxious to provide them beforehand with a certain backing of theory, which Lettice was to supply. It need not be supposed that this was a case of the blind leading the blind, for Lettice could have taken a post as National schoolmistress at any moment. It was one of the recognised

duties of a clergyman's daughters, and any other serious-minded young ladies in the parish, to teach in the school, not only on Sundays but week-days, and in normal circumstances Lettice and Agnes both took classes regularly three times a week. What the modern teacher would think of such an invasion by amateurs, who chose what class they liked, to be taught according to their own sweet will and by the light of nature, it is difficult to imagine; but the uncertificated schoolmistress of that day, borne down by the burden of a large mixed school worked without trained assistance, accepted it, if not thankfully, at least with a good grace. Moreover, the question of discipline, which would now be rampant, did not arise then, since the youthful rustic was still painfully conscious of the divinity that hedged the Squire and the Parson and their belongings, and was more likely to be silent from excess of awe than to disport himself rudely in their presence.

'The Young Schoolmistress' was the subject Lettice was revolving in her mind as she returned one afternoon from a long walk over the Downs. It arose naturally, for she had been visiting a distant cottage to remonstrate with the shepherd's wife for not sending her children regularly to school. Mrs Gear could not be persuaded that the advantages of learning outweighed the drawback of long tramps over the barely-marked track which crossed the swells and hollows of the Down, and persisted that the children wore out boot-leather and gained enormous appetites to no purpose, besides requiring for the school fees money which could have been far more profitably laid out otherwise. Aunt Sophy would certainly have reminded her where her true interest lay by plain allusions to the Squire's Christmas doles of boots and beef, but to Lettice this savoured of bribery, and she turned impatiently from recollections of her unequal contest with Mrs Gear to think of the book. But here again there was disappointment. She had wished to make a new departure, and write

it in biographical form, telling the story of the varied experiences of a girl on her way from monitress to mistress. But Mr Richer, having considered the matter, had decided against novelty. The book must again take the catechetical form, and represent a series of conversations between the ideal clergyman's wife and the prize pupil of her ideal village school. Lettice was getting decidedly tired of these ideal girls, who talked so beautifully, and never forgot to say "ma'am," and were so grateful for all that was said to them—in such painful contrast with the girls of real life—and her thoughts wandered. Surely a tract showing the wisdom of sending children regularly to school would be a good thing; it was certainly needed, to judge by the continual lamentation of the neighbouring clergy and their wives on the subject. There was some incident she had heard not long ago which would surely serve as the backbone of her remarks, and she racked her brains to recall it. Yes, she remembered—someone had been telling Aunt Sophy of the disastrous fate that overtook the members of a very unsatisfactory family in her village who could never be induced to take advantage of the education provided for them. But surely there was something——? Yes, Lettice remembered now; she herself had adduced it, to the manifest confusion and displeasure of the visitor—the fact that the wildest and worst of the unsatisfactory family had enlisted in the Army and there covered himself with glory in the Kaffir War. This quite spoiled the moral—to Lettice's mind; the visitor declared loftily that it had nothing whatever to do with the main theme. Now that she herself was arguing on the same side, Lettice tried hard to save the moral. If only she could say that the brave private would have been advanced to sergeant but for the fact—due to the neglect of his early advantages—that he could neither read nor write! It was so possible, so natural, that she could almost persuade herself she had been told it, but she pulled herself up sharply. *It was not true*, and how could she hope

to benefit others if she falsified fact in her effort to serve them?

Never before had the problem presented itself to her in this overwhelming way. She left the path and sat down on a grassy tussock, staring before her with knitted brows and earnest eyes that saw nothing of the slopes of olive turf starred with tiny blue and lilac blossoms and pink-budded dwarf meadowsweet. Mechanically she felt for the wild thyme whose scent reached her, and crushed a head of it in her fingers as she battled out the question, Why must everything she wrote have actually happened? The conversations between her pattern instructresses and perfect pupils had never taken place, certainly; then why was it right to present them as facts, and yet wrong to alter the ending of a real incident to save an endangered moral? She herself would have seen nothing wrong in writing, as she had intended, the history of an imaginary girl as an example to others, nor would Mr Richer; he merely considered it inexpedient. But if she had written that imaginary girl's history, she would have felt bound to make all go well with her; from pattern monitress she would have become pattern assistant, until the book closed leaving her in full charge of a perfectly organised school, respected and trusted by clergyman and squire and their wives. But this would not be necessarily true. In real life many things might interfere with this uninterrupted progress—ill-health, accident, undesirable relatives, even employers who were not as perfect as they should be. These possibilities would be disregarded in the interests of the moral. Then why——? Like a flash it broke upon Lettice that in writing confessedly of actual events the chronicler was bound to recount only what actually happened, while, when the setting and the story were avowedly imaginary, the writer was limited only by his sense of propriety in the incidents and the development of his plot.

But this was fiction! Lettice gasped. Fiction! novels! the thing that her father held in the supremest

contempt and abhorrence. Like many other people, Mr Tourneur had the gift of convincing himself that what he did not care for was wrong. Thus, it would be wrong to spend an afternoon over a parcel of new novels, while it would be quite right to spend it in reading an article on those same novels in the *Quarterly*, because this would be literary criticism, whereas the other was waste of time. Lettice would never forget the day when, as a child of ten, she had been discovered deep in 'Camilla'—the miniature edition of which in three dumpy volumes was to be found in the little bookcase in the parlour—oblivious to all beside, and her father's wrath. She had been forbidden to open a book for a month—a terrible deprivation to a bookish child—and it was to that time that she traced the shadowy impression, probably derived from some half-heard conversation between Aunt Sophy and Rebecca, that the mother who was so faint a memory to her had been devoted to reading, and that her love for fiction had caused frequent strife between her and her husband. What would be Mr Tourneur's feelings—he had winked at the novel-reading in Mrs Akehurst's drawing-room, but probably merely because the opportunities for it were so exceedingly scanty—when he learned that his own daughter proposed to write a novel?

For this was what it had come to already. Ever afterwards the scent of wild thyme would bring back to Lettice that hour when in the silence of the Downs, broken only by distant sheep-bells and the cries of birds, the shackles fell off which had held her hitherto. Now she knew why she had always felt cabined, cribbed, confined, when she was writing. A whole new world was open to her to occupy and conquer. No longer bound by the chains of fact, she could arrange for things to happen as she wished—which, with the unconscious arrogance of the artist, she felt was the best way for them to happen. To the emancipated writer of to-day poor Lettice's freedom would have seemed a very small thing, for it was conditioned

by a rigid morality and limited by a scrupulous conscience, but such as it was, it was immense to her. As though a barrier had just been removed, and an imprisoned river allowed to flow without restraint, she knew—suddenly and all at once—what this novel was to be that she was going to write. It came to her as she sat spell-bound on her grassy throne—the general outline of the story, one or two tremendous scenes. For the first time in her life she knew the full flow of inspiration.

The gathering shades of evening, deepening the olive of the slopes opposite her almost to black, forced themselves on her notice at last, and she realised that she was alone in the heart of the Downs, some miles from home. Yet even as she rose to hurry back, she paused to look down on that tussock of grass, and the patch of wild thyme beside it which her unthinking fingers had almost denuded of its flowers, with a kind of wonder. She could never forget the place where so momentous a thing had happened to her. To the end of her days she would be able to pick out that spot on the Downs from any other. But sheer fright made her hurry away—fright not of the solitude around, but of the reception she would meet with when she reached home. As if it was not enough to have to make her terrible announcement—Lettice never dreamed for a moment of concealing her new design from her father—she must inevitably begin by incurring his anger by being late for supper. But she was happily saved from thus adding to her misfortunes, for when she reached the road, a farmer, driving by in his taxed cart, pulled up and asked her if she would like a lift, which she gratefully accepted. Thereafter she displayed her usual interest in the price of corn, Farmer Puttick's recent loss of his two best plough-oxen, and similar topics of local news; and when her charioteer dropped her at the Rectory gate, he drove away with the conviction in his mind that "Miss Lettice was as knowledgeable a young lady as ever he did see; she did seem to take up what a man said as quick

as ever he did say it." Little did the good man guess at the terror which hung about Lettice as she dragged her feet up the little drive and in at the door. Would her father absolutely forbid her attempt? would he even turn her out of doors? She crept upstairs and took off her bonnet and smoothed her hair mechanically, looking round her room when she left it as though she had never seen it before. At tea her white face attracted the compassionate attention of Aunt Sophy, who thought she had lost her way and was over-tired, and heroically led Mr Tourneur on to talk about the latest theological pamphlet which was creating a stir—such things did create a stir in those remote days—of which she knew nothing and for which she cared less. Lettice hardly uttered a word during the meal, but when her father had said grace, and was lighting the study candle he had brought in with him from one of those on the table, she spoke tremblingly, gripping the back of her chair.

"Papa—I want to tell you—I want to write a long book—a novel."

"Do you indeed, my dear? I have no objection, provided you don't ask me to read it." Mr Tourneur was far more occupied with knocking an intrusive "thief" off his candle-wick than with listening to his daughter, but before Lettice had been able to realise that her great mountain had suddenly become a plain, he seemed to perceive that an epigram, however satisfying, may need supplementing, and turned as he left the room. "Understand, Lettice, this is not to interfere with the performance of your duties. If I saw any sign of that, it would become my duty to put an end to the project."

"Yes, Papa," said Lettice dutifully, and stood, with a rather strained smile, still gripping the back of the chair.

"Sometimes, Laetitia," said Mr Tourneur acidly, "your expression of countenance is positively inane. In your own interests I would recommend you to study to improve it——"

“Before the looking-glass——” Aunt Sophy broke in. “Yes, Lettice dear, it really is an excellent plan, I assure you.” The door closed sharply. “My dear, what is the matter?”

“He didn’t mind at all!” was all Lettice could say, so overwhelming was her astonishment and relief.

“Mind, my dear? why should he? How could he be anything but pleased and proud? I often think you misconceive your dear Papa. Come, clear the table, and you shall tell me all about the book presently.”

But Lettice could not communicate the glory of her vision, and her halting words failed to stir Aunt Sophy to enthusiasm. “Yes, my dear, very pretty!” she said at intervals, and then dropped placidly asleep, leaving Lettice to hem neck-cloths for her father and to wish wildly that she durst rush for pencil and paper and begin to write at once. For in spite of Mr Tourneur’s gracious permission, there were grave practical difficulties in the way of embarking on her joyful task. What with household duties and school-teaching in the morning, parish visiting in the afternoon, and all the needlework that had to be accomplished somehow, her hours were filled from morning to night. True, she might rise earlier and also sit up at night in her own room, but the experience of the last two or three years had shown her that after a day of strenuous bodily labour the mind was not at its clearest for brain work, and that a certain amount of sleep was absolutely necessary. Would it be possible to emulate Jane Austen, and write as she sat in the parlour with Aunt Sophy, keeping a piece of needlework at hand in case of the sudden appearance of her father? But this would be deceitful—and moreover, Lettice knew by painful experience that once she was absorbed in her writing it would need something much more startling than Mr Tourneur’s measured tread in the hall to rouse her to his approach. She looked round the parlour in a kind of despair. With its breast-high

panelled walls painted a brownish-drab, and its shiny yellowish-drab paper above, it seemed to her for the first time like a prison—a highly virtuous and beneficent prison in which she was condemned to hard labour for life. She rebuked herself for her wickedness almost before the thought had crossed her mind, and to complete her self-abasement Aunt Sophy woke up suddenly, and said, in the tone of one continuing a conversation which had not been interrupted—

“Ah yes, my dear, just so. By the way, have you still your little savings by you, as I recommended?”

“Oh yes, auntie, in great-great-grandmamma’s brocade bag,” said Lettice, smiling at her.

“Then that only shows, my dear, how well it is for the young to take the advice of their elders. How much is there?”

“About seven pounds, I think—a little over.”

“Then that would be enough for two years. Yes, my dear, I consider it my duty to tell your good Papa that instead of Jerusha’s coming only in the morning, we really need her as a regular servant.”

“But he would never hear of it!” cried Lettice, aghast.

“Pray, my dear, leave the matter to me. I propose to point out that at my time of life—though, thank God, I am hale and hearty still—it is scarcely decent for me to have to take the share I do in the work of the household——”

“Oh, Aunt Sophy!” cried Lettice, in mingled remorse and horror.

“Oblige me by listening, my dear. I shall go on to remark that when Emily comes home in the winter we certainly ought to have a maid to open the door.”

“But there will be one more to help in all that has to be done!” objected Lettice, in hopeless bewilderment.

“Will there indeed, my dear?” Aunt Sophy was sarcastic for the first time in her life, quite without intending it. “That is as may be. But in any case, it would be most unsuitable for you or Emily

to open the door, and you will hardly expect me to do so?"

"No, of course not. But we always open the door now. What difference will there be?"

"My dear!" Aunt Sophy bridled and looked coy. "Have you forgot Emily's looks? You take my word for it, we shall have the young gentlemen buzzing about like flies round a honey-pot!"

"But how could they come to see Emily?" It was a little damping, though no doubt salutary, to be drawn up to this Olympian height with Aunt Sophy, and look down upon Emily and her prospective suitors beneath, but Lettice tried hard to feel it gratifying.

"They won't come to see Emily, my dear. They will come to see your Papa with a message from someone or to ask him a question about last Sunday's sermon. Or perhaps they will be so good as to carry a note from their mammas instead of letting a servant bring it. But they will hang about until they have seen Emily. Oh, I know what it is—trust me! I was young myself once." A sigh to the memory of the sailor killed at the Nile.

"But do you really think Papa will——?"

"My dear, if I pledge myself that the change shall cost him nothing but Jerusha's food, how can he object? It would be inhuman, and he is the most amiable of men. Now you see how much better it is to settle things in this agreeable way, instead of having an unpleasant discussion and making a great fuss. For of course, my dear, I shall do just as much in the household as I have been accustomed to do, and so you will have plenty of time for writing your pretty tale," and the old lady beamed as though calculated dissimulation were the very delight of her heart.

"Oh, Aunt Sophy, how kind you are! But you shan't—of course you shan't!" cried Lettice, throwing herself upon her.

Aunt Sophy straightened her cap. "How vehement you are, my dear! But I must beg you won't dis-

appoint me. Let me tell you I have given a deal of thought to this adjustment of our little domestic difficulty, and I am more than satisfied with it."

Whether Mr Tourneur read his aunt's motives in their entirety Lettice never knew. He was very busy when she detained him after breakfast, and assented to her scheme without apparently giving very much heed to the details, only stipulating that Jerusha was never to be allowed to set foot within the study door. Rebecca was pleased because she had now a respectful auditor in the evenings, though she grumbled at the plague of having a girl always about; Jerusha—in a close frilled cap with strings tied under the chin—was pleased because she had secured the desire of her heart; and Aunt Sophy was pleased both for Lettice's sake and for the triumph of her own diplomacy. Not even the fact that Emily's return was postponed for another six months owing to her being commanded to accompany Miss Housman, who was her godmother as well as Aunt Sophy's friend, on a tour abroad, could damp Miss Tourneur's satisfaction, for she found in Lettice's novel much the same interest she had anticipated from Emily's love-affairs. It became the regular custom for Lettice to bring what she had written in the morning down to the parlour in the afternoon, and with many complaints of modern handwriting as compared with that of her young days, Aunt Sophy would settle herself to read it. Sometimes, alas! she dropped asleep, to the bitter mortification of the unfortunate author sitting opposite; but more often a sudden chuckle, or a violent assault with handkerchief on spectacles and nose, would proclaim that the reader had to a gratifying extent entered into the feelings of the writer.

It was with all the valour of ignorance and innocence that Lettice entered on her labours. She had no mis-giving whatever as to the story it had come to her to tell—all she feared was that in the telling she might fail to do it justice. After all, she knew her own little world very well, and she had gained glimpses of others

while exercising the silent surveillance which Mrs Beringer so much resented during her visits to the Hall. She had an intuitive grip of character, and the knack of seeing things from other people's point of view, and her omnivorous, if restricted, reading had supplied her with an amazing fund of information on most varied subjects, all neatly stored in a very orderly mind. Of the tragedies of life she was not ignorant—no worker among the poor, even on early-Victorian lines, could be—and as to its sensations, the discourse of Aunt Sophy and her cronies, once they were properly embarked on the gossip of the neighbourhood, was apt to be thrilling and even lurid, now that the silent listener sewing at the table was no longer regarded as too young to hear anything really interesting.

From the very first, Lettice had determined with herself that she would not model her hero upon Gilbert—nothing should induce her to do so. He should be the very opposite, dark, saturnine, polished in manners and keen of tongue, oppressed with a hidden secret, of course—all heroes were at that time, just as they followed Childe Harold in possessing a regrettable past! But there was a secondary hero who inevitably gathered to himself many traits that were Gilbert's, and who died young and in the odour of sanctity, to the accompaniment of floods of tears from his creator and Aunt Sophy. There was a beautiful heroine, blue-eyed and golden-haired—she had to be either that or endowed with raven hair and night-black eyes, for the intermediate shades were forbidden to protagonists, and open only to their confidants of either sex, who might also lighten the gloom of the main action by a pleasing frivolity of behaviour. Thus, then, the puppets played their part—no puppets to their author, but more alive than the living people round her—and when the wild thyme perfumed the air of the Downs again, the huge pile of written sheets in Lettice's cupboard reached completion. Aunt Sophy, at her own demand, assisted in the final revision—really that she might read over again the parts that she particularly liked—and with

the very best intentions, agonised Lettice by continual terrific discoveries of mares' nests. "My dear, I thought Vavasour was in Rome, and you say he looked out upon Piccadilly." "My dear, I am sure Veronica's eyes were grey at the beginning, and here it says they were brown. Well, now, how could I have made such a mistake?" "My dear, I have the strongest possible impression that Mrs Minching said she was thirty about five chapters back. Now Veronica tells Cecilia she is forty-five. Oh, I see, she was understating her age, the hussy! Most unprincipled of her!"

But even the agony of mind caused by these and hosts of similar cavils was lived through at last, and the manuscript, all beautifully written out, was solemnly conveyed into Abbotsbridge — by Farmer Puttick's waggon, not by the Rectory chaise, with Mr Tourneur as driver, perish the thought! — to the care of Mrs Akehurst, who had read portions of it, and had had a highly confused idea of the rest communicated to her by Aunt Sophy. Under her guidance Lettice wrote the momentous letter to the publisher selected for the conspicuous honour of having 'Highpark,' by Bliss Turner, submitted to him, and having assisted in enveloping the fair white pages in sheet after sheet of the best brown paper from the shop, went home utterly desolate, feeling that she had nothing left in life.

CHAPTER XII.

IN A DARK HOUR.

GILBERT sat alone in his reception-hall at the Residency—feeling so lonely that he had left his office in the search for companionship, but found none. His native followers had all retired to their houses for the evening meal, and for the moment he was the only European in Bandeir itself. The campaign against the Rebas—in spite of the momentary check, a rumour of which shattered Tony's nerve—had been wholly successful, ending in the submission of the pirates and the liberation of the many captives they held in slavery. To secure their good behaviour in future, Gilbert ought to have been able to establish a European Resident in their country, but as he had no one to send all he could do was to take hostages from them and warn them that any further acts of piracy would be punished by their complete annihilation. Leaving his new allies to re-found their polity upon sounder lines, he had returned to Bandeir to concert the subjugation of the Taropans, but the tribe was astute enough to take a hint from the misfortunes of others, and anticipated him by sending messengers to sue for peace. Since the negotiations seemed likely to be successful, Captain Blanchard thought it best to take the *Neæra* back to Singapore, since the ship's company had suffered considerably from the fighting and the dangerous climate of the rivers, and to report to the authorities the reason for what must appear his inexplicable change of front in joining forces with the adventurer into whose proceed-

ings he had been sent to enquire. He had dropped down the river this morning, and with him went Tony; Sansom had left by the *Golden Helen* more than a fortnight before. For the first time since starting on his adventure Gilbert was free from the society of the two men whom he had unwillingly learnt to distrust, but the one feeling he was conscious of at this moment was the most profound depression.

He sat in his usual place, at the head of the long table where the officers of the *Neæra* had dined with him the evening before, and the memory of the lights and decorations, the good fellowship and the good cheer, served only to make the solitude and the darkness more intense. It was not his servants' fault that he was left thus. They had wished to kindle the lamps and spread his evening meal, but he felt that food would choke him, and desired them brusquely to go to their suppers and return later. They knew better than to question any order Datu Brinja might give, and arguing from his strained and exhausted look, reasoned quite simply that in his recent tremendous efforts he had nearly—perhaps altogether—worn out his magic. What could be more natural than that time should be needed for communing with the spirits who made him what he was? Hunger, solitude, darkness—these were all favourable conditions, and after his vigil Datu Brinja would come forth recharged, as it were, with the virtue which was so potent first in overcoming and then in attracting all who opposed themselves to him. In the meantime no native would venture to set foot in the great airy deserted house, since the spirits who came to talk with Datu Brinja would naturally resent intrusion.

Gilbert's own feelings were much more in accord with his servants' diagnosis than anything would have induced him to admit. He felt utterly done—no spark of courage or heart or hope left. To himself he seemed to have sacrificed career, money, health, love itself, for the wildest of dreams. True, he was here in Bandeir, in the position which had once commended itself to

him as ideal, the object of curiosity, veneration, terror, to the whole district. Yusuf was his obedient ally, the old King had accepted him with unlooked-for friendliness. Within his boundaries peace reigned as it had not done for generations, outside them his name was fast becoming one of might. But all this was nothing to what he had intended to do, and it seemed to be the limit to what could be done. The energy sapped away by the fever in that first campaign might have returned could he have afforded to rest, secure in the support of the men beside him. But they could not be trusted, and he had been forced to drive a wearied brain and a languid frame through tasks that would have tried a man in robust health. And now, when he had at length rid himself of that maleficent influence, it was at the cost of knowing himself incapable of further action. He could not himself do what needed to be done, and he had deprived himself of those who—with whatever inadequate motive, and however sluggishly—might have been hounded into doing it.

Just at this moment he felt no bitterness against Sansom and Tony. He had written scathingly to his brother Charles about both, but now he asked himself how they could have done better with such a leader? He was a mere dreamer, he saw it now, aiming at the impossible with absurdly inadequate means. He had never really set himself to calculate the cost and method of making Bandeir what he wished it to be; he had taken possession of it, and was stranded for want of money and men. Lettice had warned him long ago of the visionary nature of his dreams, and he had laughingly refused to listen. Why, her practical spirit beside him might have made all the difference. He might not have been able to marry for years, but to have her letters—to be able to take counsel with her, though at an interval of months——! And he had deliberately cut himself off from that possibility. Even her father could not have banished him permanently, he must have permitted them an understanding—the right to exchange letters; but now, even

if Mr Tourneur were favourable, that would avail nothing. It was Lettice who would now refuse to have anything to do with him. He recalled the letter, stained with angry tears, in which Agnes had reproached him for his desertion. "And I do hope and pray, my dear brother," she wrote, "that you may never be called upon to suffer as you deserve for your cruel action. I trust—nay, I am sure—that Lettice would join me in this prayer, but I cannot ask her, since she will never willingly take your name upon her lips." She had written no further reproaches after that, but had told him in every letter what Lettice was doing, and how she looked, with a cruelty strange in the gentle Agnes, as though for the purpose of keeping the wound open. For Gilbert would have been the last to deny that there was a wound, and one that he would carry to his grave. He asked himself now what madness had seized him, to make him cut himself off from the best influence in his life. He had a vague idea that it was done in a moment of exaltation, when he felt that he was specially chosen by Heaven to regenerate Bandeir, and that he ought to make some stupendous sacrifice in response to the honour. He remembered how ill he had been feeling; it was as though on the one side lay return home, a long and easy life, and Lettice, on the other a few years—perhaps only a few months—and a great work. And he had chosen, as the rash self-sufficient dreamer that he was might be expected to choose. The work! the work of which he had dreamt and for which he had prepared himself from boyhood, the work which had lain waiting for him and for no other. And here he was, bankrupt in purse and health, and the work barely begun. He could not even undo his mistake and start afresh, for how could he quit Bandeir, leaving no one to take his place? And to attempt to approach Lettice in writing would be as insulting to her as something told him it would be useless. He must see her, read in her face whether there was the slightest chance for him, before he could even ask her

pardon. And meanwhile, he must struggle on as long as exhausted flesh and blood would permit, knowing that his work was incomplete and badly done, but bearing as best he might the responsibility he had taken upon himself.

"Residency ahoy!" The shout came pealing up from the water which lapped against the piles of the front verandah, and broke into his meditations, but he thought his ears had deceived him, and made no attempt to answer. "Seems to be nobody at home," the voice went on in stentorian tones. "Wait till I get a light. Hang it!" there were footsteps on the ladder, "it's gone out. Hoy, you sir!" as Gilbert's white-clad figure loomed dimly through the darkness, "is this where Captain Berringer hangs out?"

There was something faintly reminiscent of Snid-dingly in the breezy tones, but the whiskered face above an open collar which the striking of another lucifer revealed was not familiar. "I am Datu Berringer——" began Gilbert, as slowly as if he had forgotten his own name.

"Oh, hang all your Datus! Gilbert, old cock, don't you remember me?"

"I am not aware that I have the honour——" Gilbert began stiffly. Then recognition came to him, and he sprang forward to grasp the other's hand. "*Peter!* I was never so glad to see any one in my life."

"Mind the match!" said Peter Tourneur stolidly, changing it to his left hand. "Can't congratulate you much on your crib here. Of all the mopish places——!"

"It ain't mopish when it's lighted up—won't be now you're here, anyhow. My good fellow, I'm enchanted to see you. Come and—oh, hang it! everybody's out of the way just now. But let's go and rummage."

"You look a pretty fair sort of a kind of a ghost," remarked Peter, striking another match and sheltering it with his hand that he might contemplate his host

the better. "What's come to you, living all alone in a howling wilderness of a barrack like this, and sitting talking to blue devils in the dark?"

"I don't know. It was blue devils, I suppose, but you have exorcised them. How in the world did you get here?"

"Came down from Singapore in your own hooker—up the river in a native boat."

"Then your boatman will have roused out the servants. Ah, here they come!" as astonished faces began to appear by torchlight at the doors opening on the back verandah. Gilbert gave one or two orders, then turned to his guest again. "Your room will be ready in a jiffy, Peter, and dinner on the table a second after. Come into my den, and tell me how long you can stay."

"That, my good sir, depends entirely on yourself."

"You shouldn't put temptation in the way of a poor beggar pining for companionship. If you do it again, I swear I'll keep you here for good, chained by the leg."

"Leave out the chain, and I don't care if you do," said Peter, with a rather embarrassed laugh. Gilbert turned from the lamp he was lighting, and seized him by the shoulder.

"Peter, you can't mean it! You're come to stay?"

"If you'll have me," said Peter grumpily.

"And what have you done?" demanded Gilbert, becoming suddenly very busy with the lamp again—"Knocked down your skipper, or murdered a Singapore policeman in the execution of his duty, or what?"

"If that ain't looking a gift-horse in the mouth! No, my most noble upholder of law and order, I've done nothing except leave the old *Amelia Ann* in the lurch, and 'twasn't much of a lurch neither, for the skipper's nephew was second, and the old man was glad enough to make him mate in my place."

"But what brought you here—just at this moment?"

"Why, the *Golden Helen* came in, with that choice rascal Sansom on board, and 'we met, 'twas in a crowd.' He saw fit to pass some remarks upon you, and I went for him. Old Briggs wanted to take him on, but I bade him see fair, and got the fellow polished off nicely. But you have a fine poisonous reptile to look out for in that quarter, you take my word for it. Then I asked Briggs how you were getting on, and made up my mind to desert and look you up."

"But you must have sacrificed the pay due to you! And I can only give you a bare living allowance."

"Well, what's the odds? You won't find me dainty, I assure you. Let me take my tucker with you, and hang the allowance! I'm here to back you up."

"My dear fellow, I can't say——" Gilbert wrung his hand again. "Here, come to your room. You must be famished. How—how are all your family at home?"

"All in their usual, so far as I know. But I have had no letters for a year. Following the ship up and down t'other side the Horn, I suppose, or between Port Phillip and Swan River. The Pater may be a Bishop by now, and the girls married, for all I can tell."

A faint half-formed hope died out in Gilbert's heart, and he spoke the more cordially to hide his disappointment. "Believe me, Peter, I am fully conscious of the sacrifice you have made in coming here. I can never sufficiently express my indebtedness——"

"Then don't express it. Hillo! that's high treason, ain't it? You're skipper here, and I must mind my p's and q's. Aye, aye, sir! yours to command."

Gilbert studied his guest's face curiously when they sat down to the belated meal. Peter dwelt in his thoughts chiefly as the very incarnation of mischief, equally dreaded and beloved by the good wives of Sniddingly, who suffered grievously in their property from his exploits, but invariably tried to beg him off punishment for the sake of his handsome face and

merry ways. It is due to Mr Tourneur to say that he never listened to the plea for a moment, and perhaps the transition was not so overwhelming as it might seem from the Rectory to the forecastle of a merchant-ship, severe school though that was in those days. Gilbert read the record of that schooling in his friend's tough form and iron fists, and in the strong jaw which forbade beholders to presume on the mirthfulness of the eyes, and his heart swelled with pleasure.

"Peter," he said impressively, "I'll eat my hat if you ain't the very man we want here."

"You do me proud, sir!" laughed the guest. "Hopes as I'll give your honour satisfaction," he pulled an imaginary forelock.

"Oh, stow all that nonsense!" commanded Gilbert, "and don't call me 'sir.' I'm as glad to see you as if you were my own brother."

Peter looked up shrewdly. "That's all right," he said, "but by your leave we'll begin as we mean to go on. You want men here, and in good time you'll get 'em. Tell you what, there's one you might have at once, and that is your young brother, Roger. He was at Singapore in the *Amaryllis*, and he'll come like a shot if you will square your father. Well, say you have a dozen or twenty men here, you'll want to keep a tight hand over 'em. If ever discipline is needed it's aboard a privateer, which—with all respect to you—is about your figure, eh? You'll find me glad and proud to sign on as mate, if that's the job you have in mind for me—but mate I am, and you are owner, and don't you forget it, for I shan't."

"I say, you remind me uncommonly of Lettice!" said Gilbert, and could have bitten his tongue out. "I mean, your name ought to have been Daniel," he added clumsily.

"No one ever said Lettice and I were alike before," said Peter good-humouredly, "but you and she were always precious thick, so you ought to know. But Lettice is eight thousand miles away, bless her! and long may she stay there, and all other petticoats too!"

"Why, you're a woman-hater!" said Gilbert, amused.

"I am—in these latitudes. Women are all right at home, but not here. That's why I like this concern of yours—no females about."

"I assure you the town swarms with 'em."

"Females who count, I mean. Girls in muslin and ringlets, old mothers in turbans—sort that never let a man alone."

"Ungallant fellow! Is that your experience?"

"Oh, I don't suppose they'd come after a mighty magnificent three-tailed Bashaw like you, but when it's a case of poor Jack——! Let 'em all stay at home, says I, and then when a man's once gone on board ship, he can get away from 'em."

"A wife in every port?" suggested Gilbert slyly.

"No fear. Got enough of 'em at home."

"Peter, you libertine! How many, pray?"

"As many as I want, and that is none. Here, what's up with you, talking twaddle like this?" Irritation had suddenly removed the barrier between Peter and his employer.

"Oh, I don't know. You must excuse me. I'm a gibbering idiot to-night, and all out of pleasure for seeing you."

"You flatter me, I declare. But what's turned your head? You ain't marooned here with none but black-fellows about? I thought you had Tony Ridding with you? Where's he got to?"

Gilbert sobered down at once. "I have had to part with Tony as well. Should have thought Sansom would have told you."

"Well, we didn't precisely meet for polite conversation, you know. He was saying you had choused him out of thousands, to put it into a bottomless hole you called Bandeir, and I got him on the jaw. After that we were more or less mixed up."

"Well, I'll tell you and be done with it. Tony had not the pluck for this place. He left me in the lurch—badly; it might have been fatal. 'Twasn't the first

time he had done things of the sort, either. So I have sent him home, to bring Bandeir to the notice of the bigwigs in London, and try and get us properly supported. He'll do all right there. There's no vice in him—not like Sansom, whom I heard with my own ears proposing to set up slavery here when he thought I was disposed of. At first I made up my mind to buy both of 'em out and send them about their business, but when I had time to think it over I saw Tony was to be pitied rather than blamed, so I dealt with him accordingly."

"Some people are too good for this wicked world," said Peter, without the admiration in his tone that the contemplation of such virtue ought to have called up. "I have never known Tony run straight yet, but he has got on your soft side, and no mistake."

"We won't discuss the subject," said Gilbert, at his stateliest. "But you will be good enough to remember that it is to Tony's interest to do well for Bandeir, since his hope of seeing any return for his money depends on my success." He looked sharply at Peter, who replied only by a nod, but as if he would not, rather than could not, support his view further. Gilbert shook off his displeasure with an obvious effort. "And my success here depends on money, you'll say? Well, it is so largely, I'll confess. If you've finished, come into the office, and I'll show you from the verandah there some of the things I have laid out to do when we have the money and the men."

They crossed the hall, and from the office verandah, which faced the slightly rising ground behind the town, Gilbert pointed out in the moonlight the sites for the public buildings of his dream-city—the church, mission-house and mission school, the court-house, the college for training young natives as public servants, the club, the fort—which was rather to impress the native mind than to defend the place, since who was likely to attack it now?

"My word! you've got it all uncommon complete," said Peter. "But where's the cash coming from?"

"That's our difficulty. I own I am disappointed in the Malays. I thought they would turn to and work like Trojans when once they were under a just government, with each man's gains secured to him, but no—they take it as giving 'em so much more time to do nothing in."

"You've got to increase their wants," said Peter sagely. "I've seen that in the South Seas—wonderful what one European-furnished house can do in setting the fashion for gimcracks, and that all means trade. Mirrors, now—you ought to have 'em all round that hall of yours, and everybody in the place green with envy. And chandeliers, with plenty of lustres and those hanging chains of cut glass. No chief's house in Bandeir would be complete without one or two if you once started 'em."

"My good fellow! as if I had money to waste on such tomfoolery!"

"No waste at all about it. An investment for the good of your people."

"But it would only touch the chiefs, and they would merely set their people to work till they had got sufficient dollars together, and then the work would stop."

"That's the Malay all over. And I don't think you'll alter him—not from the outside, at any rate. No, my good sir, what you want is the yellow-boys. Oh, I don't mean the guineas this time—you know you want those well enough. What you want is someone to do the work the Malays won't do—Chinese, no less."

"And I have set my face against bringing them in."

"Like a flint?"

"Law of the Medes and Persians," said Gilbert, smiling. "Pray what are you looking so quizzical about?"

"Because laws ain't always kept. I have a message for you from old Briggs—forgot it till now. What's the precise footing you are on at this moment with the piratical gentry up the river to the south'ard?"

"The Taropans? Their messengers are here to treat for peace."

"On what basis, may I ask?"

"That they give up piracy and raiding, live peaceably with Bandeir, and undertake no hostilities against any one without my leave. On those conditions I propose to guarantee them in the possession of their country."

"Of their country as it stands at the moment the terms of peace are signed—or sealed, or whatever it is—I presume?"

"I suppose so. Why not?"

"Oh, merely that the gentlemen are busy extending their country by means that would hardly commend themselves to you. You know there's a Chinese colony beyond them?"

"I know—Dinkop. They are working the tin and antimony, and I fancy a little gold. A good many of them have married native women, and are really settling down—not like the birds of passage I abominate. It's too bad the Chinese Government's not letting women emigrate to these places, for how can you get a satisfactory lot of men without 'em? A community like that I couldn't object to."

"Then that's a good thing, anyhow, for you've got 'em."

"What?"

"Yes, that's where the cleverness of the Taropans comes in. Foreseeing that they'd be confined within their own borders pretty strictly when once you had the whip-hand of 'em, they made arrangements for spreading their net over Dinkop before you got your finger in the pie. The idea was, I believe, to wipe out the place at one go, all but one or two wretches who were to testify that the Dinkop people had only just been stopped in time from wiping out the Taropans——"

"But the Dinkops are as peaceable a lot as there is. I don't believe anything would make them fight."

"You may think so, but if they were all dead that

wouldn't bring 'em back to life—eh? But it seems the Dinkops got wind of the proposed arrangement, and justified your high opinion of 'em by making at once for Bandeir, bag and baggage. They were arriving in the river in shoals—yellow men and brown women and innumerable little piebald kids—boats loaded down to the water's edge—when I left the *Golden Helen*, and Briggs was at his wits' end to keep 'em from coming up here. They say quite plainly that they're come to sit down under your shadow—touching, ain't it?—and he can't make 'em see the accommodation is insufficient. He has their boats marshalled in a creek, and the ship lying across the mouth, but if some of the people don't get to shore in the night and come up here through the jungle, I'm a Dutchman."

"They must go back, of course."

"Yes, I'd like to see you turning 'em out and sending 'em back to Dinkop, where the Taropans will have stole everything they can loot, and burnt the rest, by that time."

"At any rate we'll take order with the Taropans," said Gilbert, waiving the question of the fugitives. "This is the reason for their spinning out the negotiations, then! Well, I'll give orders to-night, and we'll be off down the river in the morning, after I've taken you to pay your respects to Yusuf."

"That's the gentleman whose mayor of the palace you are, ain't it? Why so careful of his feelings?"

"Because he is a gentleman, and I hope I am one."

CHAPTER XIII.

A NAVAL BATTLE.

It was very soon to have to undertake a new punitive expedition when that against the Rebas had only just returned, and the Bandeir forces felt this strongly. It added to their discontent that the object of the expedition was not publicly stated. When they were going against a foe, they liked to be able to parade up and down the river in their boats for a day or two first, the warriors clashing their spears and shields in time with the oars, those who had muskets firing them off, and all joining in chanting bloodthirsty war-songs. But how could this be done, when they were told that the ostensible object of Datu Brinja's journey was merely to conclude peace with the Taropans in state, though weapons were to be taken in case of treachery, while time was so pressing that the boats were to drop down the river as they were ready, and rendezvous at its mouth? Gilbert's desire had been not to hint at the possibility of hostilities at all, but his hand was forced by Yusuf, who took a great fancy to Peter when he paid his respects, and wished to accompany the white men when they met the Taropan chiefs. Since fighting was practically inevitable, Gilbert knew better than to allow him to risk his life and infringe Malay etiquette by being present, and the Prince acquiesced reluctantly in his decision.

At the river-mouth Gilbert found, as Peter had warned him, almost the whole of the expatriated

population of Dinkop precariously lodged in much overcrowded boats assembled in a creek, whither Captain Briggs shepherded late arrivals to join them. It was difficult to discover whether the fugitives had fled before an actual invasion of their territory, or merely from the rumour of one, and by midday Peter was on his way down the coast in a swift prahu to ascertain the actual facts. Meanwhile, Gilbert did his best to reassure the refugees with promises that they should quickly be restored to their homes—promises which seemed to afford them little satisfaction, since they replied unanimously that they much preferred to remain in Bandeir.

Without Datu Brinja to superintend the preparations, the Bandeir army was lamentably slow in mobilising, and only five or six war-boats had appeared at the rendezvous when Peter returned from Dinkop. His report was terse and to the point.

"I landed below the place, and made my way round by the tin-workings. There's no Dinkop left—houses and everything burnt, dead bodies without any heads lying about. Taropans holding high jinks and squabbling over the loot on the shore."

"That settles it, then. They want a lesson badly, and they are going to have it."

"Rayther thought of giving 'em one myself. They were all so taken up that I could have scuttled a good few of their boats unknown to 'em, but it struck me you might prefer to deal with them in one lot."

"Precisely. We don't want half of them taking to the jungle and having to be hunted down. Now for a pleasant little surprise. I'm going to take the *Golden Helen* down and wait for them in the mouth of their own river, while you bring on the Bandeireans."

"Hope we shan't find you wiped out when we get there."

"Oh, I shall give 'em a chance—invite explanations, and so forth. Mustn't act hastily."

"The twenty or thirty murdered Chinese that I saw will take a lot of explaining," said Peter.

"And the worst of it is that they were probably the pick of the lot, since they were brave enough to stay and defend the place. But I don't go about attacking people—even pirates. If they attack me—well, they have only themselves to thank for what they get."

"Oh, all serene. Just stave it off till I come along—that's all I ask you. You don't object to my stationing a proa off the Taropan to watch for your signals in case you're hard pressed?"

"Excellent. I'll send up a rocket. But the Taropans' conscience must be very guilty indeed if they venture to attack the ship."

"You don't think they'll smell something fishy in your not taking their envoys back with you?"

"Can't help it. They would spoil everything. Yes, I daresay our proceedings will look suspicious—especially to people whose own good faith is so shaky. Well, come on when you have got thirty boats together, and leave the rest to keep the Dinkops quiet."

The crew of the *Golden Helen* were much cheered to find themselves released from their police duties and promised a chance of fighting. The ship steamed down the coast—an unusual extravagance though the wind was light, but Gilbert had calculated the length of time the Taropans would spend in consuming the arrack looted from the Dinkop shops and in recovering from its effects, and found that he had only half a day or so to spare. As a matter of fact, he had selected his station, commanding the main channel, and moored the *Golden Helen* there, less than six hours before the triumphant pirate fleet crowded tumultuously into their home waterway, expecting nothing less than to find visitors encamped before the front door. Two or three prahus ran foul of one another in the confusion, and no one had presence of mind enough to organise an attack, so that Gilbert was able to make his peaceful intentions evident, and to explain that he had come in connection with the negotiations. The Taropan chiefs

could not well point out that he had chosen an inconvenient time, and they made the best of the intrusion, hustling out of sight their wounded and the piles of loot with which the prahus were laden, and appointing a formal interview for the morrow. It was a satisfaction to the white men to find that every prahu that would take the water had clearly been pressed into the service of this last great raid, since it diminished the risk of an attempt from behind. The Taropan stronghold was some miles up the river, and without boats its inhabitants were powerless to annoy the *Golden Helen* in her present position.

The night passed quietly, the quietness possibly assisted by the very evident precautions against treachery taken on board the ship, and on the morrow Gilbert and three Taropan chiefs—their king, they said, had not been with them on this voyage—met on the neutral ground of a very small island, little more than a sandbank. Both parties were unarmed, but both were backed by their followers, drawn off only sufficiently far to allow their boats to float, and armed to the teeth. Experience had broken Gilbert's retainers of their early habit of remonstrating with him for thus exposing himself to treachery. His argument was that if danger arose, he, sitting alone on his chair on one side, had a distinct advantage over the two or three chiefs on the ground opposite, whose heads he could knock together if he saw a suspicious movement, and break through them before they could get to their feet. When Captain Briggs objected that the feat, if not impossible, would be distinctly hazardous, his leader pointed out that the best proof of its feasibility was the fact that the need for it had never arisen. Certainly on this occasion the Taropan chiefs seemed anxious only to please. Gilbert discerned very soon that they were desperately anxious to find out how much he knew. They could not tell where the Dinkop fugitives had taken refuge, and it was possible they might have gone lower down the coast instead of to Bandeir, so that there was after all a hope of getting

their treaty before Datu Brinja found out what had happened. It was characteristic of the native attitude to the white man that they did not even contemplate the possibility of his abrogating the treaty when he discovered how he had been tricked.

The negotiations proceeded on the lines sketched out by Gilbert to Peter, and the Taropans were careful not to labour the point of the guarantee desired for their territories. Everything was tending to a most blissful conclusion, when the inconsiderate white man threw a bombshell into the happy gathering.

"This is a great occasion," he said, "and I desire to make it as great as possible by including in the treaty your neighbours the people of Dinkop. I have sent my officer, Tuan Pitah, to visit their town, that he may bring me word of their wishes."

Sheer desperation alone withheld the three chiefs from exchanging glances of horror. The two juniors kept their eyes stonily on the ground, while the eldest ventured on a respectful remonstrance.

"But, Tuan, we are here, and the Dinkop people have sent no message. Are we to be kept waiting on their convenience, when in their lack of breeding they leave Datu Brinja's summons unanswered?"

"Even if they send no answer, my messenger will return," said Gilbert. "I must have his report before I make the treaty without them."

"Doubtless they have murdered Tuan Pitah!" said the old chief hopefully, and his colleagues, struck by the brightness of the idea, chimed in with instances of the extreme treachery and wickedness of Dinkop. But Gilbert was not to be moved.

"We will meet again to-morrow," he said. "By that time I doubt not I shall have heard from Tuan Pitah."

He read in the eyes of the chiefs that nothing but the minute possibility of his being still ignorant of the fate of Dinkop saved him from their murderous hands. That each had a kris concealed about him somewhere he had no doubt, but there was just sufficient uncertainty to prevent their drawing them and rushing upon

him. He regained his boat without accident, and Captain Briggs heaved an audible sigh of relief and mopped his streaming brow.

"Let the crew sleep in their clothes to-night, skipper," said Gilbert to him, and the old sailor's "Aye, aye, sir!" was emphatic. Steam was got up, boarding-nettings triced up and guns loaded as on the previous night, each man lay down with musket or cutlass beside him, and Gilbert's servant was placed in charge of the rockets, with orders to send up three, at intervals of five minutes, if an attack was attempted. Then Gilbert and Captain Briggs made great parade of bidding each other a hearty good-night and retiring to their cabins, where after a due lapse of time they extinguished their lights, but instead of lying down in their berths, crept on deck again. Barefooted, they climbed noiselessly to the bridge, and there lay down flat, one keeping watch up-stream, the other seawards. It deepened their expectation of foul play that the pirates were not sleeping on shore, according to the almost invariable custom, but in their crowded boats. They had landed to cook their evening meal, but had not drawn up their prahus, which were moored in a compact mass between the *Golden Helen* and the mouth of the river.

A night-watch is always trying, and Gilbert and Captain Briggs were sorely tempted to wish that the Taropans would attack and have done with it. The superficial quiet of the night was full of sounds which magnified themselves absurdly to the strained ear. The ceaseless throbbing of the engine, the lapping of the water, the cries of monkeys in the distant jungle, the groan of some unhappy prisoner lying bound hand and foot in the bottom of a prahu, all gave a sense of movement and mystery. But nothing happened until the sound of lapping water altered almost imperceptibly, and there came a hoarse whisper from Captain Briggs, "Tide's turnin'." He was still gazing into the shadows up-river when Gilbert crawled over to him and whispered to him to turn round.

"Are my eyes deceiving me," he said, "or are the proas nearer than they were, and are they spreading out on both sides?"

Captain Briggs glared into the darkness with practised eyes. "You've got it, sir! They're dropping nearer us with the tide."

"Give me two minutes, then. After that, full steam ahead, for all you're worth."

Gilbert slipped nimbly down the ladder, a white figure against the white paddle-box, and went from man to man on deck, waking them quietly. As they took up their stations, it was evident to all that the prahus were much closer, and that they were now in a crescent formation, those at the horns rowing with muffled oars, while those in the middle were merely drifting. The object was clearly to sweep round and enclose the *Golden Helen*, but Gilbert refused to give the word to fire. The enemy must disclose their nefarious intentions first. To the intense relief of his men, who felt they were being sacrificed to a quixotic scruple, the sight of the dinghy towing behind proved too much for the prudence of a young and zealous pirate. He was in a small fast prahu at the extremity of the right horn of the crescent, and the boat, tugging at her rope as the tide floated her away from the ship, looked an easy prize. He forgot the plan of campaign and the need for caution, and rowed straight across towards her. His kris was lifted to cut the rope, when a hoarse hail from the ship bade him let that boat alone, and a bullet followed, to impress the warning upon him. He was not hit, but his fellows realised that the hope of a complete surprise was gone. The one chance was to rush the ship before the sentry who had fired could rouse his comrades. With a yell the steersmen changed their course, the rowers bent their backs to the oars, and from all sides the prahus came dashing upon the *Golden Helen*. They were so numerous, and the attack was so fierce, that Gilbert had only time to tell his servant to send off the rockets before he was involved in a deadly hand-to-hand fight. The pirates

had got a footing upon the bulwarks, and were slashing and tearing at the tough netting, while from the decks of the prahus others hurled spears or stinkpots. These burst on the deck with a violent explosion and a most evil odour, and had the chemicals of the Taropans been as powerful as their hatred, the *Golden Helen* must have run ashore in a sinking condition or gone down at her moorings. Happily, however, the noise and the smell were the worst things about them, and presently the cables were slipped, and the ship began to forge ahead like a horse trying to free itself from a pack of wolves. The pirates had not expected this move, and the prahus ahead of the paddle-boxes tried to draw off hastily, for fear of being smashed, while those abaft them made haste to grapple the bulwarks more firmly, lest they should be left behind, as the wolves would hang on their victim's flanks, biting and tearing. In the confusion and darkness—for the spasmodic glare of the rockets seemed only to make the blackness blacker when they faded—Gilbert and his men fought doggedly, cutting at the assailants who burst through the netting, thrusting at those still hacking at it from the outside. They did not attempt to use firearms after the first volley, for even a pistol took some time to load in those days, and Gilbert's revolver, the only one on board, jammed after a single shot. Cutlasses, clubbed muskets, and even boat-stretchers, were the weapons used, and the krises of the pirates were superior to any of them.

"Rally 'em to the poop, sir!" rang out a stentorian voice overhead, and Gilbert realised that Captain Briggs, from his elevated position, must perceive some danger as yet invisible to himself. With infinite difficulty he and his men fell back, contesting every inch of the way, gathering up a comrade or two here, meeting a fresh rush of the enemy there. Happily the poop ladder was still standing, and owing to the height of the poop, the pirates had not obtained a footing on it. Bidding his men hold the ladder, Gilbert called two of them to follow him, and

rushing to one of the small poop-guns, they slewed it round by main force, so that it pointed along the deck. Again the voice rang out from the bridge.

“Lay down, ye swabs, ye— ye—” choice epithets. “Flat on the deck, every mother’s son of ye! Now, sir!”

Taking it on trust that his own men were as safe as might be, Gilbert seized a pistol from the stand beside him, and fired it into the touch-hole of the gun, then loaded and fired again and again as fast as he could. He durst not pause to see the effect, but among the dense throng of pirates that packed the deck it was tremendous. The shot cut lanes through their ranks, and split up the crowd that had obtained possession of the forepart of the ship. Some tumbled over the sides and swam to their prahus, others made a dash for the bridge as a haven of safety, and Captain Briggs and the two or three men with him had a lively five minutes. Matters were still undecided when a distant yell, gradually coming nearer, made itself heard between two discharges of the gun. Neither side knew what it portended, but presently Gilbert distinguished the *Bandeir* war-cry.

“Help at hand, lads!” he shouted, and even as the men rallied their exhausted strength and began to press the pirates back, the *Bandeir* boats dashed up in fine style, with Peter, nearly beside himself with anxiety and excitement, stamping and shouting on the steering-platform of the foremost. The other boats rushed upon the *Taropan* prahus, but Peter brought his close to the *Golden Helen*, and half leaped, half scrambled on board, followed by his crew and a man who had been standing beside him. They took the boarders in the rear, and Gilbert, abandoning his gun, once more left the poop and led his men forward. Thus caught between two fires, the pirates went over the side by dozens, and being as much at home in the water as on land, struck out for their prahus, which had detached themselves from the ship with all convenient speed on the approach of the *Bandeir*

boats. So fierce a fight was raging on the water in the darkness that it was impossible to tell what was happening, and the moment Gilbert had clasped hands with Peter he snatched a blue light from the deckhouse and passed it up to Captain Briggs. The ghastly glare showed the water in the immediate vicinity of the ship alive with heads, which dived promptly with a yell, while in her wake was a mass of furiously contesting boats, the Taropans trying to make off up the river, and the Bandeireans to stop them. The light showed also that owing to the darkness and confusion and the in-coming tide, the *Golden Helen* was heading straight for the cliff on the left of the river-mouth, and Captain Briggs only brought her round just in time. Making a great sweep, she came back to the fight, Gilbert roaring through the speaking-trumpet to the Bandeireans in Malay to offer quarter to any Taropans who would surrender. Both sides were far too busy to pay any attention, but as the ship reached them, four or five Taropan boats succeeded in bursting through the press and rowed for their lives up the river. The Bandeir boats were anxious to pursue, but Gilbert called them off, not knowing what defences might intervene between the river-mouth and the pirate stronghold. Moreover, there was plenty to do in repairing damages, overhauling the enemy's captured and deserted vessels, and securing the prisoners. Gilbert was giving his orders when his voice failed suddenly, and grasping at Peter's shoulder, which eluded him, he slid down on the deck. When he regained consciousness, he thought he must be dreaming, for Yusuf was holding a tin cup to his lips, while Peter was hastily binding up a nasty spear-wound in his arm.

"Yusuf!" he said incredulously. The Prince laid a finger on his lips.

"Hush, my friend! I am not known to be here. My soldiers have orders not to see me."

"He would come," growled Peter, tugging at his

bandage. "My fault, I suppose. I got desperate at last, when the boats didn't turn up—rowed up to Bandeir and told the palace gang what I thought of 'em. Made up my mind to join you at once with the force I'd got. Next thing I knew, this chap was on board with me, and t'other boats following as fast as oars could bring 'em. Give you my word, I thought we were too late when the sentry-boat hailed us off the harbour-mouth to say she had seen your rockets go up, but Yusuf gave it hot to our crews, and we came in on the tide with a will. There! now what's the other damages?"

"None. I didn't know I had any."

"None! My good sir, you might be a pincushion. Every pirate in the river seems to have had a try at you with something. Here, I'll only tie up the worst, and then in you go to your cabin, with Yusuf and your boy to look after you. I'll clear up this mess."

The clearing-up was a work of time, for the usually immaculate decks of the *Golden Helen* presented a sorry spectacle. Five of her own crew were killed, and there was not one of the survivors unwounded. The native servants, who had barricaded themselves in the cabins and burrowed under the berths, were the only men unhurt, but when the seamen dragged them out by the feet, shrieking and protesting—for they refused to believe in the victory—and cuffed them into realising the truth, they hastened to explain that they had been defending their masters' property with their lives. Bulwarks were broken and rigging cut about, and the deck ploughed up in several places, while blood and corpses were everywhere. Peter made a rough clearance before he turned his attention to the captured boats, which bore gruesome evidence of the raid upon Dinkop in the shape of piles of partially dried heads, and a few unhappy prisoners, who, helpless in their bonds, had been almost trampled to death during the fighting. Of Taropan prisoners there were not many, for both sides had fought to kill, but Gilbert's orders had had thus much effect that some

twenty wretches had been secured and bound in various painful positions, with the cheering assurance that on the morrow they would be handed over to their own late captives for torture. They assailed Peter with entreaties when he passed them in review, conceiving that he was regarding them from the standpoint of a connoisseur in heads, and assured him whole-heartedly that their heads would make much better trophies if they were cut off at once instead of being submitted, while still in position, to the tender mercies of the Dinkop people. It went sorely against the grain with Peter to remember that he was Gilbert's representative, and as such, bound to merciful treatment, but he assured them gruffly that their heads were in no danger, and ordered their bonds to be rearranged—watching while his orders were carried out.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GRATEFUL FUGITIVE.

GILBERT was unable to leave his cabin in the morning, much to his disgust, and the battered ship was in charge of Peter and Captain Briggs when she made her way slowly up the river, the Bandeir prahus scouting cautiously ahead. But the fight seemed to have gone out of the Taropans. Elaborate preparations for defence had been made at one or two places, but the stockades were deserted, and a huge boom which had been prepared to block the channel lay idle along the bank. Peter went ashore to examine these things, and came back puzzled.

"I could have sworn there was the hand of a European in some of these dodges," he said; "but how could there be?"

"Some Malay who has served in a Dutch warship," suggested Captain Briggs, and there they had to leave it.

The Taropan fortress was reached late in the afternoon, and proved to have been abandoned—apparently on the preceding night, for the fires were cold. The dwelling of the chief showed him to have been a person of luxurious tastes, and also—which amused the seamen very much—possessed of a liking for strong liquors, since large numbers of empty bottles, doubtless looted in their full state from captured merchantmen, were discovered. Acting on

Gilbert's instructions, Peter destroyed the fortifications and the palace—if such it might be called—and returned on board. The disappearance of the remnant of the Taropans was annoying, since if they were left alone, they would merely recommence their piracies as soon as they felt themselves strong enough, while it was not a pleasant task to have to follow them up through a jungle where the barefooted man with a blowpipe and poisoned arrows had very distinctly the advantage of the booted man with a musket. Nevertheless, this was what must be done, and the three Europeans and Yusuf held a council as to the best means of doing it. They had moved on shore, Gilbert being carried in a hammock, to escape the necessary cleaning and repairing operations, and were encamped in one of the large houses of the place. Peter was naturally to head the expedition, and Yusuf was anxious to take a party of his own in another direction, so that the work might be sooner done. Now that he had once emancipated himself from the fetters of etiquette, he was determined to do as much as he could before they closed on him again, but Gilbert would not hear of it.

"I am responsible to your father for your life, Prince," he said. "How should I answer to him if anything happened to you in doing what every Malay knows it is forbidden to a king to do?"

Before Yusuf could reply, a wild shouting broke out among the Bandeireans, most of whom, when once Peter had posted sentries, were scattered through the place, looking for more loot in the houses which they had looted already. Now they were seizing their weapons and rushing together as though they expected an attack. Peter sprang to the edge of the verandah.

"Why, there's only one man!" he said, "and running like blazes! Don't believe he's a Taropan, neither."

"I think he is the king of the Taropans," said Yusuf, joining him. "See, his *sarong* is of the royal colour."

"Pity he didn't tuck it in better before starting to

run. What a fat old codger it is!" chuckled Peter, as the stout elderly man in the flapping yellow waistcloth came panting up to the gate, there to be stopped by warlike yells from the sentries, emphasised by a bullet or two.

"I'm blowed if it ain't a European!" said Captain Briggs in stupefaction, following Peter down the ladder.

"Ah!" said Peter significantly. The fat man was lying on the ground before the gate when they approached, with a curious group of Bandeir warriors looking at him. He struggled into a sitting position and raised his hands on high.

"At last I finds myself among 'umans again! Oh, gents, 'ooever you may be, I make bold to thank you for reskying of me from a dreadful doom."

"Then ain't you the king of the Taropans?" demanded Peter.

"King?" with indignant emphasis. "Slave, more like! Ah, gents, I could make your blood run cold, that I could, if I told you 'alf I've suffered at the 'ands of those brutes!"

"Well, get up and come in," said Peter, extending a hand, not very willingly, to help him up. "Who are you, pray?"

"Richard Barge, master barque *Williamina*, London——"

"You ain't a seaman!" burst from Peter and Captain Briggs together.

"And 'oo says I was, pray? With your interfering ways you make a man forget his own name! Richard Barge is my name, and England is my nation. London it was my dwelling-place before I was so unfort'nit as to 'ave the fancy take me to see the world."

"On board the barque *Williamina*?" suggested Captain Briggs, without conviction.

"Precisely, old cock—gentleman passenger on his travels, all the accommodation of the ship at his disposal, messing with the master, I'll ask you to remember. Oh, gents, I ain't easy made to blub, after all I've been through, but I could shed tears to think of that

'appy little floatin' 'ome and the brave chaps aboard of her!"

"Why, what happened to them?" asked Peter.

Mr Barge raised his hands again. "Murdered, gents, foully murdered, by these pirating black fellows. And only me saved—though often and often I've begged 'em on my bended knees to do me the kindness of killin' me rayther than force me to witness all their wickedness."

"They don't seem to have treated you badly," said Peter, looking critically at Mr Barge's massive proportions.

"I may be of a full 'abit, sir, though I didn't expect to 'ave it cast up to me at such a moment as this. For why? they was fattening me up for to eat, sir."

"Nonsense! these tribes are not cannibals."

"So you say, sir. It ain't for me to contradick you, but p'raps you'll allow me, wery humbly, to 'old my own opinion, seein' as I know."

"Well, you had better come and give an account of yourself to Captain Berringer." Mr Barge started violently.

"Captin'—'oo did you say, sir?"

"Captain Berringer—Datu Berringer, the natives call him—the Governor of this part of Jhalábor. Come, you ought to be grateful to him, if you were having such a bad time with the Taropans, for it's him you have to thank for rescuing you."

"It's 'im I 'ave to thank? Oh, gents, my 'ole life shall express my gratitood! But when you talk of giving an account of myself—why, that's what a man don't expect to 'ave to do when he's gone through what I have."

"Don't see what harm it can do you," growled Peter, propelling him firmly up the ladder. Once at the top, and in Gilbert's presence, Mr Barge waxed eloquent. The incidents of his voyage, the capture of the vessel by the Taropans, the variegated villainies of the tribe and the manifold miseries of his life among them—all were poured forth in an unceasing flow. He certainly

gave an account of himself, though it was impossible either to cross-examine him on it or to check the particulars. At length Peter intervened forcibly.

"That'll do, Mr Barge," he said. "Captain Beringer ain't fit for any more talking just now. Come along, and I'll find you a shake-down somewhere."

"Wait a moment," said Gilbert wearily. "Perhaps Mr Barge can tell us where the Taropans are to be found. That will be better than trying to get the prisoners to talk."

"Oh, you 'ave some prisoners, 'ave you?" Mr Barge's face had fallen ludicrously. "They was certain as you'd have killed off every soul in the proas."

"Twenty or so. They are in safe custody next door, but kindly treated. But if you know where the people have taken refuge——"

"Oh, I know all their 'aunts, sir; I'll show you! Serve 'em right for treatin' me like dirt! I'll pay the nasty brutes out!"

"There is no question of punishment." Gilbert's voice was cold. "My sole wish is to bring the Taropans to their senses, and get them to settle down quietly."

"Well, that's as *you* please, sir. If you was to ask me, I'd say pay 'em back a bit of what——"

"There, that's enough," said Peter, pushing him out. "There's a room here where you'll do all right. Take a snooze now, and when the prog comes along I'll give you a call."

From force of habit he looked round for some means of securing the guest's door, since the man's appearance and conversation filled him with the liveliest distrust, but these native houses were innocent of fastenings, and he turned away to find Captain Briggs waiting for him, with one eye screwed up into a profound wink.

"What price gammon and spinach—eh?" enquired the elder man, in a sepulchral rumble intended for a whisper.

"Fellow's a bad egg, and no mistake. Does anything particular suggest itself to you about him?"

"A certain desirable locality called Swan River, Mr Tourneur?"

"Precisely. The head of the Convict Establishment there is Captain Cleminger, d'ye recollect?"

Captain Briggs nodded portentously. "Well, then, it falls to us to protect the guv'nor, who's no more to be trusted alone than a babby—though maybe I've got no business to talk like that of my owner. I've left the Prince in charge for the present, while I go on board to look after things, and if you lay down in your room here, you'll be rested against the evening, and no one can pass without your hearing."

Peter did not expect Mr Barge's misdeeds to assume the form of murder, but he took the hint and placed his pistols at hand. After the excitement and toil of the night he was soon asleep, and had to confess afterwards that a whole regiment of murderers might have passed without disturbing him, since when he woke Yusuf was bending over him, speaking his name in low distinct tones.

"Tuan Pitah, come! I have something to show you. Make no noise."

Without putting on his shoes, Peter followed him to the doorway of Mr Barge's room. The door was merely a kind of hurdle of canework, which made no pretence of fitting exactly, and allowed ample ventilation nearly all round. Following the direction of Yusuf's finger, Peter peered into the room. It was empty.

"Where has he gone?" he whispered.

"I will show you." Yusuf led the way again to the back verandah, and keeping Peter and himself in the shade, pointed out a gleam of dirty yellow in the unsavoury region—which served as the occupier's dustbin—under the verandah of the next house. On the verandah sat the Bandeir sentinels, quite happy, some asleep, others playing a game of chance, secure that their prisoners in the rooms behind could not possibly escape, since the front verandah was also guarded. Peter's mind leaped to a startling conclusion.

"He is cutting through the floor—letting out the prisoners!"

"No," said the Prince. "I thought so at first, but he has no kris. Besides, how could they escape from the town? I think he is only talking to them."

"But they might come here and kill Datu Berringer. Why, you have left him alone!"

"My foster-father is with him. No, I heard the floor creak, and I crept out to see the fat man crossing the verandah and going down the ladder. He has not been gone long. See, here he is coming back!"

They crept back to Peter's room, and presently had the satisfaction of seeing Mr Barge's shining face appear like a very red full moon at the top of the ladder. He looked round narrowly, then slithered along the verandah and in at his own door with unexpected agility, his progress betrayed only by the tell-tale sagging of the cane floor.

"I should uncommonly like to know what he was up to!" said Peter, and acting on impulse, burst into Mr Barge's room. He was just too late to catch him in the act of settling himself on the bed again, and only a large bewildered expression of absolute innocence was visible on the countenance that raised itself from the bamboo pillow at his entrance. Peter was no diplomatist.

"What were you doing talking to the prisoners just now?" he demanded.

"Me? What prisoners?" came the astonished question.

"The Taropans. Oh, you needn't try to humbug us, we saw you. What were you saying to them?"

"Well now, gents, you 'ave me there." Mr Barge sat up, so as to speak with more dignity. "I don't say as I'm proud of it, but it came over me sudden-like there was those beasts as had used me like a dog receivin' kind treatment, as the Capting said, and I couldn't stand it no longer. So I up and give 'em a little bit of my mind—just a taste of the language as they've give me for months. And there 'tis, and I

ain't ashamed of it neither. Will you be so good as to shut the door be'ind you, sir?" this to the discomfited Peter rapidly disappearing. He expressed his feelings without reserve to Gilbert.

"Briggs and I are certain the fellow's an escaped convict from Swan River," he said. "They do manage to work up north, you know, and then get taken off by Malays fishing for trepang or pearl-shell."

"But why not a time-expired convict?" said Gilbert. "There are plenty of 'em in Australia."

"Why don't he say so plainly, then? But I believe I can show him up, if you'll lend me the bugle you've got on board."

"I will do nothing of the kind. It's quite natural the poor wretch should feel a delicacy in disclosing his antecedents, and I won't have him driven into more lies. You can suspect him as much as you like, and take what precautions you please, but I will be no party to setting traps for him."

"I suppose you intend to offer him employment in Bandeir?" Peter spoke with tremendous sarcasm.

"That must depend on his behaviour. Not without observing him very closely first, you may be sure."

But Mr Barge had his own ideas as to his future usefulness, and when they met at dinner, astonished his hosts by volunteering to act as their ambassador to the Taropans when he had succeeded in locating them.

"I don't pretend as it's exactly a soft job," he said modestly, "but you've treated me right well, gents, and I ain't ungrateful. They knows me, and if I go and talk to 'em they're bound to listen, whereas if you go alone, fust thing you know will be a flight of poisoned arrows rattlin' about your ears."

"We can't allow you to sacrifice yourself, Mr Barge," said Gilbert. Mr Barge assumed an expression of meek heroism.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that, sir. But if it

was to be—why, it's my skin against all of yours, and a good exchange."

Admiring murmurs ought to have greeted the sentiment, but Peter, rising from the table abruptly, growled that he would take precious good care Mr Barge did not risk his skin alone, and adopted elaborate precautions for keeping him from deserting the party. But the eager Malays who were detailed to cut him down instantly if he attempted to disable Peter and escape were not called upon to act, and even the distrustful Peter was forced to admit that he led them with great care by an almost imperceptible path through a swamp, where they might easily have come to destruction by themselves. When at last they arrived at the edge of a patch of firm ground, fairly clear of jungle, and the guide intimated that he must go forward into the middle of it alone, Peter could not well object, though he took the precaution of covering him with his gun. The first result of the appearance of the stout figure in the midst of the moonlit space was a startling one, for a hail of spears and arrows poured from the jungle on the farther side. It seemed extraordinary that Mr Barge was not hit, but his powers of language were certainly uninjured, for he poured forth a torrent of what was evidently vituperation. Peter was ignorant of the Taropan dialect, but it was sufficiently near that of the tribes inhabiting the hinterland of Bandeir for some of his Malays to understand it, and their joyful grins assured him that Mr Barge was avenging in full all the verbal injuries he had suffered during his captivity. The Taropans made no attempt to injure him when once they had heard his voice, and as he talked on, the bushes parted, and first one man and then another emerged into the moonlight, engaging in animated conversation when he would permit it. He was assuring them of their absolute helplessness in face of Datu Brinja, the Malays said, and extolling the merciful character of the ruler who would permit them to make their submission after

their atrocious conduct. They followed him like sheep presently when he strolled across to Peter to report that he had made them see reason, and they were all willing to come in and submit the next day. He even offered to remain among them for the night, and bring them in in the morning, but this Peter would by no means allow. He had noticed as a curious fact, on emerging into the moonlight, that none of the spears and arrows directed at Mr Barge's neighbourhood had passed within a yard of him, though beyond that safe radius the ground was spiked with them, and he had no intention of leaving him and his late masters together. Therefore he blandly assured the guest that nothing would induce him to permit him to imperil his valuable life by returning into captivity even for one night, and placed a special sentry over his hut when they built themselves a temporary camp.

They returned to the town the next morning, followed by a straggling crowd of Taropans. Most of the warriors had perished in the fight on the river, but there were old men, women, and children in apparently endless succession. Their king had been killed in the fighting, it seemed, and his body had gone down with the royal prahu—it was not remembered till afterwards that the chiefs at the river-mouth had said the king was not with them—but the council of old men, who spoke for the tribe, offered their submission, and promised to obey the rule of any one Datu Brinja might set over them. Gilbert's conditions were duly interpreted to them, and they promised glibly to refrain from piracy, to restore the spoil taken from Dinkop—so far as it remained above water—and to pay blood-money to the relatives of the murdered Chinese. A fixed sum—calculated in terms of the antique Chinese jars which were at once the most valued possessions and the standard of exchange of the aboriginal tribes—was to be paid yearly as tribute to Bandeir, and in return Gilbert engaged to admit them freely to all the privileges of trade, and to

send them a European to reside among them and act as his representative. Broad smiles broke out when he said this, but were speedily changed into scowls and frowns directed at Mr Barge, who stood modestly by, and Gilbert dismissed the assembly with orders to wait on him again on the morrow, when he would institute their new ruler. As an earnest of his good intentions towards them, he released the prisoners, and they joined their rejoicing friends. The only person who did not appear quite satisfied was Mr Barge, who — without being summoned — followed Gilbert into the room whither he had called Peter and Captain Briggs for a consultation.

"Pity to make two bites of a cherry, ain't it, Guv'nor?" he remarked, with some truculence. "I could 'a been gettin' things in 'and at once if you'd settled up now."

"I am absolutely at a loss to know what you mean, Mr Barge," said Gilbert, raising himself on his elbow.

"Why, all this delay in tellin' the people 'oo their Datu is to be. I don't 'ide it from you, gents, I'm itchin' to get to work and bring 'em into order."

"I fear you are labouring under a delusion. Mr Tourneur—Tuan Pitah—is remaining here as my representative."

"Wot?" Mr Barge's face had turned purple. "And arter all I've been through, and all I've done, goin' at the risk of me life to get the Taropans to surrender, you 'ave the face to tell me I ain't to 'ave the job?"

"Most certainly you are not. I appoint no one whose work I have not watched for a time. You will accompany me to Bandeir, and if your conduct is satisfactory, a post will be found for you later. But in no case would you return here."

"Oh, well, if that's your style, Guv'nor, I don't mind sayin' as I'd as soon be aboard the 'ulks—sooner be among the Taropans as a slave again."

"Oh no, you don't, my fine fellow!" said Peter,

intercepting him dexterously in an intended departure. "What do you think of sending him on board for the night, sir?"

"A very good idea. See to it, Briggs," and Mr Barge was conveyed on board the *Golden Helen* by Yusuf's Malays and incarcerated in an empty cabin. He was much subdued in the morning, and attributed his outbreak to acute disappointment acting on an emotional nature. He had felt that he could be of so much use, he said, as Resident among the Taropans, and do such good work, that he naturally resented being deprived of the opportunity, but he should hope to approve himself wherever he was. The opinion of the Taropans on the change did not appear. They accepted Peter and his Bandeirean bodyguard without objection, and were already at work building them a house when the fleet dropped down the river, and their ruler suspected that if Mr Barge's sway might have been lax in certain important particulars, it would have been exacting in the matter of demands for creature comforts.

The return of the victorious fleet to Bandeir was a great occasion, for to the rejoicings of the populace were added the acclamations of the expatriated Dinkop people, who saw their wrongs avenged. But they were by no means disposed to return to their old homes under Peter's protection. As they pointed out frankly to Gilbert when—having despatched Yusuf under cover of darkness to creep back into the palace where he was supposed to be lying ill of fever all this time—he halted to parley with them, they liked Bandeir much better than Dinkop. As he had anticipated, in spite of the watch kept on them, a number of the men had managed to slip away and do some prospecting, returning to their friends with glowing accounts of the mineral wealth of the district. They would submit to any restrictions, settle wherever they were told, if only they might remain in Bandeir. If Datu Brinja insisted on transporting them back to

Dinkop, they would not resist, but they would all return as soon as he was gone. If, as he threatened, he forbade provisions to be brought them as long as they remained, they would starve to death. The threat sounded absurd, but Gilbert knew that they were quite capable of carrying it out, and finally, urged by Captain Briggs, he made a virtue of necessity. After going into the question of the distribution of minerals with the men who had been prospecting, he divided the refugees into four parties, and gave them permission to settle in as many different spots, thus preventing the establishment of a powerful community which might have become an *imperium in imperio*. With their wives and children they were conveyed to the lands assigned them, and speedily settled down happily, producing tin and antimony in large quantities, a certain amount of gold, and even a few diamonds. The Malays, who had done nothing to develop the resources of the soil, looked on with interest and without envy, and the revenue officials engaged in glowing forecasts of increased gains. It was a strenuous time for everybody, for before Gilbert had recovered from his wounds, he was involved not merely in the difficulty with the Chinese, but in the great scheme of building a schooner which might ply to and from Singapore when the *Golden Helen* was needed on the coast, since, in the light of recent events, it was clearly unwise to let her go far for the present. Mr Barge acted, very unwillingly, as his deputy, going on innumerable errands, and keeping the ship-builders up to their work.

It seemed that the tide had turned with regard to Bandeir. The departure of Sansom, and the fact—which soon became known—that Gilbert had borrowed money at very high interest to pay him off, inclined the Singapore magnates to look more kindly on the venture, while Captain Blanchard and his officers were loud in their praises of what had been done in putting down piracy and establishing a settled government.

The Dutch authorities ceased from troubling—officially, when they found that the British Foreign Office took Gilbert's view, and not theirs, of the treaties of thirty years ago. Two earnest young men, sent out by Charles, appeared to offer themselves as Gilbert's assistants, and when they had been forcibly despoiled of their broadcloth and their sadly limp stick-up collars, were taught their work much as a dog is taught to swim, by being hurled into the midst of it. They were not sent very far into the wilds at first, and after a due period of supervision Gilbert commended their efforts and promoted them to positions of greater responsibility, one of them becoming earthly providence to the Rebas and the other to the Taropans. This made it possible to bring Peter back to Bandeir, where Gilbert was in grievous need of an assistant to share his military, naval, judicial and legislative labours. The Malays were showing some little inclination to follow the Chinese in doing a certain amount of work, and Gilbert and Peter began to think that with capital from outside, and more European helpers, the place might become a second Singapore. Jokingly at first, they began to talk of Gilbert's going home on a visit, to beat up recruits and make definite arrangements with capitalists and the home Government. Tony had been successful, so he wrote, in forming a company for the development of Bandeir, but there were many points still to be decided, which made Gilbert's presence in London practically indispensable. He hardly took the matter seriously, however, since Peter would be left to bear the burden of the state alone. For Mr Barge had slipped unassumingly out of Bandeir when the *Hope* made her first trip to Singapore with a native crew and the mate of the *Golden Helen* as master. He boarded her at the mouth of the river, and explained that Captain Berringer had sent him to Singapore on business, but when he had once landed, nothing more was seen of him. Pinned to the mosquito-net of his bed in the Residency was a sarcastic document:—

“ Richard Barge in a/c with Captain Berringer,
Esquire.

Dr.

Cr.

14 wks. hard labor (uncom-
mon hard), at 7s. 6d., and
jolly cheap too.

14 wks. bd. and lodgen
(mighty poor), at 7s. 6d.

£5, 5s.
Paid in full.

£5, 5s.
Received with thanks.

RICHARD BARGE.”

“I observe,” said Peter, “he don’t consider he
owes you anything for ‘reskying of him’ from the
Taropans.”

CHAPTER XV.

“TOILING UPWARD IN THE NIGHT.”

MORE utter misery than Lettice felt as she walked back from Abbotsbridge after parting with her manuscript it would be difficult to conceive. Never had the long miles seemed so long, never had her weary steps lagged so hopelessly. While she was still busy with the book, she had felt no inclination to criticise it, but now a burning rush of shame came over her at the thought that she had exposed such a hopeless production to the eyes of strangers. The story, as developed, seemed so incredibly *small*, compared with the outline which had risen before her in might and majesty that day on the Downs. True, Aunt Sophy thought it perfect, and there were many passages and episodes which she herself could never tire of reading. But there were so many others in which the execution was lamentably inferior to the design. She could not understand it. The thing had seemed so clear, so noble, when it came to her, but as written—and the more so the more it was re-written—it was blurred, poor, clogged with accumulation of detail instead of standing out distinct as she had first seen it. Once she actually turned round and began to retrace her steps, determined to reclaim the manuscript and work upon it again. Much of it ought to be re-written, and there were ink-blots, too, on perhaps three of the fair white pages, which were sure to prejudice a reader.

But the dismal recollection that the parts which she liked best, and which had needed least elucidation for Aunt Sophy, were those in which she had made the fewest alterations, warned her to leave things as they were, and she turned homewards again. It was like going back after the funeral to a house in which someone had died to realise that her cupboard was empty, that it was no use as she sewed to plan improvements which might be inserted when she went upstairs for the night. But—must it always be like this? Lettice flung up her head like a young war-horse. She would begin another book, and at once. As to waiting to see whether *Highpark* was successful, perish the thought! She was quite sure she did not expect it to be, and in any case, it did not signify whether it was successful or not. What signified was that there was another story bubbling up in her mind which was all that *Highpark* failed to be. The hope that springs eternal in the human—and more especially the author’s—breast was a present reality to Lettice for the rest of the way home. Tired no longer, she trod on air, and the last two miles were all too short. Before she slept that night, she had written half a chapter of *Marmaduke Garnier*.

It was a happy thing that she had the fresh work and the memory of that hour of insight to sustain her through the months of gloom that followed. For *Highpark* returned to Mrs Akehurst’s care with a most lamentable regularity. There was scarcely a visit paid by Lettice to the drawing-room over the shop that was not marked by the reappearance of that hateful parcel from behind the red silk flutings of the chiffonier. And the worst of it was that these disappointments invariably came when she had been feeling particularly happy and at ease. At last she began to know the feeling, and if she went upstairs in the evening specially light-hearted without any definite reason, a cold hand would grip her heart with the assurance, “It’s come back again!” And when she reached Abbotsbridge the next day, it always had, so

that Mrs Akehurst would exclaim in surprise, "Dear me, Miss Lettice! I never thought of seeing you in to-day. I was wondering whether I had better drop you a little note by the penny post, as the carrier doesn't go your way till Saturday."

The most mortifying part of this experience was that the publishers consulted seemed to be so much more interested in the author's financial standing than in her work. Most of them clearly considered the book quite hopeless, but those who felt able to praise it always intimated that on receipt of a bank-bill for a sum varying from fifty to two hundred pounds they would have pleasure in publishing it for the writer. The demand was often reduced later—sometimes by half, once to twenty pounds down and ten pounds a month for a year or so—but dire necessity, which was to seem to Lettice afterwards not quite so dire as it appeared at the time, forced her to refuse even the most flattering of these offers. In her absorption with *Highpark* she had written fewer tracts of late, and her little store was very nearly exhausted. The carriage of that dreadful parcel by coach or rail was a constantly recurring expense, and Jerusha's wages, small as they were, seemed to be perpetually due. Moreover, comparative affluence had accustomed Lettice to luxuries of which she had not dreamt originally. She did not save the blue wrapping-paper now for writing her first drafts, and she even found herself rebelling against the necessity of turning a bonnet-ribbon more than once. Thus the outlook was sufficiently dark, when Mrs Akehurst suddenly took command of the situation. Lettice mounted to her drawing-room one afternoon to see the familiar bulge in the chiffonier door which showed that the parcel was there, and the inkstand and pens and sandbox set forth as usual on the table. But Mrs Akehurst met her with something of the mien of a Lady Macbeth.

"Yes, it's come back," she said cursorily. "But now, my dear Miss Lettice," with great impressive-

ness, “you be guided by me. Sit you down and write to Gantley & Lehigh, and send your manuscript to them.”

“But—Gantley & Lehigh!” objected Lettice, with awe, almost with terror. “They are much too grand. Why, they publish for Mr Vernor, don’t they?”

“That’s it, my dear, precisely. What Mr Akehurst says to me last night is, ‘Aim high. The book is good, we know that; then try it with a good publisher, and give it a fair chance.’ I blame myself that I haven’t seen it before. Your book was not the style for the publishers you have been trying, and it was natural for them to refuse it. Now you sit down and write.”

Thus urged, almost forced, Lettice complied, writing with cold hands and a very squeaky quill. Then once more fresh brown paper was procured, and the parcel tied up. Messrs Gantley & Lehigh no doubt owed their lofty reputation to the deliberation with which they were wont to act, for she heard nothing for over three months. But the very daring of her action seemed to serve as a spur to her mind, for on the way home she had the idea for a new tract, to be called “The Fresh Start.” She wrote it that night, and Mr Richer’s gracious approval furnished her with the means of making up the thirty shillings required for Jerusha’s quarterly wages, and also of replenishing her store of writing-paper, for the second novel was now well on its way.

Time had not stood still while Lettice was undergoing these varied experiences, which had lasted so long that Mr Tourneur was tired of inquiring genially, “And when is the great work to appear, my dear?” or remarking, “The publishers ain’t precisely falling over one another to acquire your book, I infer, Lettice.” Emily was at home again, occupied in daily proving Aunt Sophy a true prophet. She had no intention whatever of turning into a household drudge, and said so with a plainness which rather scandalized Lettice.

"If you think I am going to let my hands get like yours," she declared in a moment of expansion, with a disparaging glance at her sister's workworn fingers, "I can tell you you're mistaken. The best thing I can do for myself and you all is to get married, and I mean to."

"But perhaps nobody will want to marry you," suggested Lettice, purely in a philosophic spirit, but Emily was not pleased.

"You nasty peevish thing!" she cried heatedly, rising to look at herself in the chimney-glass. Not even that distorting medium could spoil the vision it reflected, and Emily settled her collar, pulled out her ringlets to their best advantage, and examined with anxiety a minute pimple on her cheek before she sat down again. "I'll give you a piece of advice, Lettice," she said seriously. "Don't say that kind of spiteful thing about me. It stamps you as an old maid at once, and it's quite bad enough that you are one, without always reminding people of it."

"But I didn't mean to be ill-natured," pleaded Lettice. "It is true, you know—I mean it might be."

"It won't be," said Emily dauntlessly. "Do you dare to look me in the face and tell me it will?"

"Oh no, how could I? But you know what Papa said when you asked him not to let Harry Sedhurst speak to you."

"He said I might go farther and fare worse. It didn't seem to occur to him that I meant to go farther and fare better."

"But Harry said his father had promised to set him up in a nice little box anywhere in this neighbourhood."

"With a couple of hunters, and a pony-carriage for his wife?" Emily's tone held measureless disdain. "And Harry is a younger son, brought up to do nothing but hang about. A little hunting, a little shooting, and any amount of smoking and drinking—do you think a husband of that sort would suit me?"

"I didn't wish you to have him. You know quite

well I don't care for him at all. But you seem to want—well, you know how much Sir John and Lady Sedhurst are respected.”

“What would be the good of that to me? I want a position—a certainty—of my own. Do you ever think of the future, pray?”

“For years I have done all I could to avoid thinking of it,” said Lettice, with unexpected passion. Emily stared.

“What a droll thing to say! But don't you see how foolish that is? What do you suppose is to happen to us when Papa dies?”

“Oh fie, Emily!”

“My asking the question won't make him die, stupid! Do you expect him to live for ever?”

“But—we might die first,” faltered Lettice.

“But it ain't likely, and you know it. The world *might* come to an end to-morrow, but we don't expect it to. Well, we must live somewhere, mustn't we—and live on something?”

“I—I suppose so.”

“I suppose so indeed! I talked it all over with Theodosia when I was there. She was very much concerned to hear that you were wasting so much time in trying to write a novel. Of course, if you were likely to do any good with it, it would be different, but the tracts really did bring in a little money, besides being so much more suitable for a clergyman's daughter to write.”

The worm turned. “You have no right to say I have written an unsuitable book,” said Lettice hotly.

“I didn't say so. How you do snap one up! I said the tracts were more suitable. But even they wouldn't keep you and me and Aunt Sophy, unless you wrote two a week.”

“And that is impossible. I can only write them when they come.”

“Oh dear!” said Emily impatiently. “How do you expect to make a living if you talk like that? You ought to write them as hard as you can, and be deeply

grateful that you can get somebody to pay you for doing it."

"But nobody would pay for them if I wrote so many. They would not be worth it. Besides, people don't want so many tracts."

Emily seemed impressed. "No, that is so, I suppose. So we must think of something else, for there will be very little. The living is worth less than two hundred a year, though of course the Squire's presents help us a good deal. Then there is what Papa makes by his writing——"

"Oh, then he really does write?"

"Of course he does, stupid! What else is he doing all day? And all those huge packets that he sends and receives by the post—what else do they mean? Why, the postage alone would have ruined him before penny postage came in. It's all nonsense making a mystery of it as he does. Theodosia says a person like you, who is always reading, ought to be able to tell his articles by the style—not that it would be much good if you could."

"You would hardly suggest that we should tax him with it?" said Lettice drily.

"No, because it would only make him shockingly angry and do no good. Theodosia says he must spend most of the money on books, which is a sinful waste, but he must have put something by. She has always done her best to encourage him to save—quite delicately and nicely, you know—by mentioning to him any good investments Charles has heard of lately, and so on, and once or twice he has thanked her."

"Well, then, if he has made investments——"

"But not enough, you silly girl! Suppose there is even a hundred a year, would it keep Aunt Sophy and us two and Rebecca respectably?"

"We could have a little house—a cottage—and a garden. We should be together—and it wouldn't be very different from things as they are now——"

"Together! and we should do lacework and embroidery, and sell it through Indigent Gentlewomen's

Repositories, I suppose! Why, I would sooner be a governess—— No, I have spent too much time making the governesses' lives a burden to them at school to submit to such slavery myself. But do I look like an indigent gentlewoman, living on garden stuff in a cottage? Not for me, my dear, thank you! Much more your style, I should say—— By the bye, was there ever anything really between you and Gilbert Berringer? I know Aunt Sophy used to hint mysteriously about it, but she would fancy anything.”

“We were not engaged, but we should have been if it had been allowed. Papa told him I could not be spared.” Lettice spoke coldly, hardly. The additional pang of Gilbert's subsequent desertion she would not reveal. Emily nodded knowingly.

“I thought I could not have imagined it all. He was always here at one time. But it was very foolish of Papa. Gentlemen never look ahead. If poor dear Mamma had lived, she would have known that you could not afford to lose the chance.”

“Emily, how horridly vulgar——”

“Nonsense! I am sensible, not vulgar. And I mean to be sensible.”

“But you refused Harry—through Papa.”

“Because I am sensible. As I have just explained to you, he had too little to offer me. I might as well have married Roger.” For Roger Berringer, in the course of a brief home visit between quitting the Navy and going out to join Gilbert, had naturally been drawn into the orbit of Emily's satellites, but being conspicuously ineligible, had been allowed to depart unscathed save by chaff and snubbing. “I must feel my future secured when I marry, so that I can leave what money there is for you and Aunt Sophy, and help you now and then, just as Theodosia will.”

“Thanks!” said Lettice, by no means thankfully. The prospect of cast-off gowns, and a five-pound note tucked into her napkin at the Christmas dinner-table, did not attract her.

“You don't sound very grateful,” said Emily, “but

I expect to be misjudged. It is absolutely necessary I should make a good marriage; there's nothing mercenary about it. And it's not as though things were made easy for me. Pray do you think it's any pleasure to me to be always at Mrs Berringer's commands, and be called 'ye'?"

For Mrs Berringer belonged to the old-fashioned school that made a point of addressing children, servants, and inferiors generally as "ye"—or more literally "y"—instead of "you," with a view to impressing upon them their lowly position.

"I thought you were so much at the Hall because you liked it," said Lettice, bewildered—"or because Mrs Berringer liked having you with her."

"Not she! She hates me as she hates us all, but until Adelaide is 'out' she wants a slave to be at her beck and call and go out driving with her when the Squire is busy. She would dearly love to leave me in the carriage when she pays calls, but when she does, some dear old stupid is sure to find out I'm there, and all the gentlemen come out with abject apologies and bring me in in a blaze of glory—blushing sweetly, and so shy! Oh, she would like to tear my bonnet off my head, and my curls too—I know!"

"She ought to be delighted to have anybody so pretty to go drives with her," said Lettice stoutly.

"Well, she isn't. She would much rather have you, but she says you are sly, and your eyes make her feel uncomfortable. So she pretends she is doing me a prodigious kindness by having me there, and I pretend it too; and if she guesses that I only pretend to stand her tiresome humours for the sake of the opportunities she gives me, she pretends she don't, and so we are all pretending very comfortably together. But it might all have been avoided, and I might have been conveniently settled long ago, if only Agnes had let me be chief bridesmaid at her wedding instead of you."

"I am sure I wish she had!" breathed Lettice, with

heartfelt genuineness, for Agnes's wedding was a painful memory. It was so natural that Lettice and Emily should be her bridesmaids that even Mrs Berringer could not offer any objection, and the Squire, as was customary, paid for their dresses, which removed the only other difficulty. But Agnes was one of those excellent and trying people who love their friends for their souls' sake only, not their bodies', and when she had decided on her own moiré gown and white silk bonnet with orange-blossoms, she fixed upon blue and white for the bridesmaids because she liked blue herself, without a thought of the effect of the colours on them. Emily looked lovelier than ever in the white muslin gown with its five flounces hemmed with blue ribbon, the blue silk mantelet edged with pinked-out frills, and the rice-straw bonnet with its huge ostrich feather shading from sky-blue to white and the white lace veil floating behind, but poor Lettice had never presented so sallow or so sorry a spectacle. “A little brown gipsy of a creature,” she heard herself called, and of course Mrs Berringer's apologetic comment to a relative reached her ear. “Poor thing! she never had any looks to speak of, but what she had are gone long ago.” In the most favourable circumstances it would have been a grievous trial to perform the responsible and conspicuous duties of chief bridesmaid, and as things were, Lettice was ten times more shy and awkward than usual. The best man, Mr Donnellan's brother, a gay and gallant Irishman, found her tongue-tied and utterly irresponsive, and even his practised tongue faltered over the stock compliments it was his duty to pay the bridesmaids in his speech at the wedding-breakfast. And all the time, there sat Emily, fuming in secret. Had the chance only been hers! The elder Donnellan was a bachelor and possessed of a good estate—to be an Irish landlord was as yet more a cause for congratulation than condolence—and would have suited her admirably. But Eugene Donnellan departed with a not unreasonable prejudice against

English young ladies, and Mrs Berringer was left with a new and bright idea. For Lettice she had the unconquerable dislike which some natures feel towards those they have injured, and it gave her immense pleasure to assure herself that not even that silly fellow Gilbert could have looked at her twice, had he been there. But Emily! Emily's beauty would grace any station, and she possessed that instinctive *savoir faire* which Lettice would never acquire if she lived to the age of Methuselah. Gilbert must certainly come home soon. Now that people were praising his work, it was absurd that he should remain exiled as if he had done something to be ashamed of, and when he came, his mother meant to confront him with a temptation that to most men would prove irresistible. Thus though Mrs Berringer, now that she had lost Agnes, would never have been happy without some one to order about until Adelaide was old enough to accompany her, it was policy rather than the desire for companionship that made her claim Emily's society almost as regularly as she had done Theodosia's long ago. The Squire was pleased, both because his wife seemed content and because he liked pretty faces, and Emily suffered her patroness's petty tyranny because in doing so she was admitted to the circle of county magnates within which she was determined to move in the future.

After Agnes's departure, news of Gilbert reached Lettice only at distant intervals, for the bride had so much to say about her husband's work and her new surroundings that there was little space for anything else. Nor was this lack compensated by Peter's letters. Peter's change of profession had struck his family dumb. Mr Tourneur was very angry indeed, but calmed down gradually to the point of remarking that having once paid Peter's premium and provided him with an outfit, he had done all he could for him, and for the future Peter must lie in the bed he had made for himself. Theodosia wrote several agitated letters

on the possibility of “rescuing the unhappy fellow from his hopeless situation,” but happily Captain Blanchard’s report reached England and was made public soon afterwards, and elements of hope became visible. Theodosia was one of the happy people who, when anything turns out well, have invariably advised it from the beginning, and when anything goes wrong, however unexpectedly, always remember distinctly the warnings they uttered against it at the very first—only to be met with derision. Since Gilbert was now walking in silver slippers, it seemed probable that Peter’s action might prove less foolish than it had appeared, and Theodosia bade Charles, in his next letter to his brother, remark sportively that he hoped there would be a post in Bandeir for little Gibby, their third boy, when he was old enough. But Peter’s own letters said little of Gilbert, good or bad. He possessed to perfection the gift, characteristic of some men of action, of giving apparently a full account—or rather list—of his doings without telling a single thing about them. So far as human interest was concerned, they were about as interesting as a library catalogue. His sisters complained that “Peter never answered questions,” but this is not surprising when his method of dealing with their letters is considered. When one of Lettice’s regular monthly epistles, packed to overflowing with every scrap of news she thought would interest him, or Emily’s more meteorlike scrawls, describing chiefly her own and other people’s gowns, reached Peter, he always counted carefully the number of crossed pages, and made quite sure of the signature. This enabled him to write, when the mail was on the eve of departure, “My dear Sister, I must begin by thanking you for your long and welcome letter,” but the letter itself was relegated for reading to a convenient season, and the convenient season never arrived. Peter was no sentimentalist. He would have repudiated the suggestion that he was not fond of his sisters, and would have felt slightly injured—though also distinctly re-

lieved—had they left off writing, but Bandeir was his world, and home had very little interest for him. The idea that Gilbert was less stoical, and would have welcomed a more detailed reply than the stereotyped “Oh, all right!” to his polite enquiries after the health of those at the Rectory, never entered his head, and Gilbert was ashamed to ask for it.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW SHE FOUND HERSELF FAMOUS.

AUNT SOPHY, Lettice, and Emily were sitting in the parlour at work. The occasion was the replenishment of the missionary basket—a kind of peripatetic bazaar which circulated among perhaps a dozen ladies in this part of the county. Each lady kept it for a month, filling it afresh with articles of home manufacture, and sent it out in charge of a servant or some other trustworthy person to her neighbours, requesting them to buy. It was a bright day in Rebecca's life when she went out with the missionary basket, and the quantity and quality of the gossip she brought back from the different houses visited was amazing. But her mistresses viewed the receptacle with less affection, for the filling of it was a heavy tax. They had so little to spend upon materials that time and eyesight must be given ungrudgingly by way of compensation, and the fine work lavished upon articles of trifling value would be a revelation to the needlewomen of to-day. Even Emily had been pressed into the service, since she had a special gift for embroidering collars, drawing her own designs or getting them drawn for her by the nearest obliging gentleman—to draw her patterns was a recognised way of recommending oneself to one's innamorata—and Aunt Sophy and Lettice were convinced that a new attraction was required. She was yawning sadly over her work, with occasional bursts of spasmodic

energy when the needle fairly flew. Aunt Sophy, with fine wool and the smallest possible steel needles, was knitting a pair of babies' boots after an elaborate pattern for which she was celebrated, and which she had duplicated so often that she ought to have been able to copy it in her sleep. Lettice, almost bent double owing to the fineness of the work, was setting invisible stitches in a chemisette—the garment which, for day wear, filled up the hiatus at the neck and wrists of the low-cut, wide-sleeved gown of the time—an order this, for Lady Sedhurst. At such moments she felt that she needed for herself the comforting counsels she had embodied in the tract, "The Missionary Basket," which had won the approval of the Bishop.

The entrance of Jerusha with a letter created a welcome diversion. It was long past post-time, and she explained that Farmer Puttick had been in Abbotsbridge, and that Mrs Akehurst had called him in and asked him to take a note to Miss Lettice. Emily's interest faded when she heard who the writer was, and Aunt Sophy remarked comfortably that Lettice must remember there were all the apples to pick over and store when the work for the missionary basket was finished, so that she would not be able to go to tea with Mrs Akehurst till next week. But Lettice heard nothing. It was only the envelope that was in Mrs Akehurst's writing. Inside was another envelope, addressed to Bliss Turner, Esquire, and bearing the London postmark. On the wafer which closed it was a device of some kind which she did not recognise. She opened it, and was deaf to outward things until she became aware that Emily was shrieking at her.

"Lettice, Lettice! *Lettice!*" she screamed. "What is it? What's the matter? Why do you look"—an unusual flight of imagination on Emily's part—"as if you had seen an angel?"

Lettice looked up, still only half conscious of her surroundings, "My book—they will accept it," she said with awe.

Emily swooped upon the letter with another shriek.

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"You don't mean it! What a do for Theodosia! Oh, Aunt Sophy, just fancy—they call Lettice 'Dear Sir'!"

"My dear, I don't understand," said Aunt Sophy helplessly. "What has happened? Has anybody been rude——?"

"I'll read it to you," said Emily, and Lettice was incapable of protesting. It was the kind of letter of which she had dreamt when she first despatched her manuscript, but which bitter experience had taught her to believe was merely a dream—full of friendly criticism, as far removed from Aunt Sophy's indiscriminating admiration as from Theodosia's contempt. Presumably the writer desired to produce a balanced whole, since every sentence was judiciously compounded of praise and blame. The plot of the novel was slightly old-fashioned and melodramatic—a new word this to country-bred Lettice, which must be looked up in the dictionary—but it was treated with considerable freshness. The manners and speech of the humbler classes had been studied with care, but the South of England inspired little interest in the reader as compared with Ireland or Scotland. The characters were well drawn—though it might be objected that there was a rude breath of reality about some of them, incompatible with the dignity of literature. The moral observations were just and delicate, but it must be pointed out that in the highest interests of the public it would have been well largely to increase their number. The modern publisher would have requested that the moral observations should be deleted altogether, but in those days all novels—even those which would now be banned by the Libraries—were heavily didactic. Finally, though Messrs Gantley & Lehigh could not conscientiously hold out hopes of any striking success for the work, yet they considered it to show such promise as would justify them in consenting to undertake its publication, trusting to recoup their outlay on further novels from Mr Turner's pen. The sum mentioned by way of honorarium was one that would hardly have been offered had not the

firm felt a good deal more confidence in the success of the book than they allowed to appear. To Lettice it was incredibly vast, and it was one that the modern writer might desire in vain for a first novel. But in those days there were incomparably fewer books and far more time for reading, and all the people who read at all read the same books, so that the risks of publishing were comparatively small. Aunt Sophy and Emily looked across at Lettice with a new respect.

"A hundred pounds!" breathed the old lady.

"A whole hundred pounds! A hundred golden sovereigns!" murmured Emily in a kind of ecstasy. "Oh, Lettice, you lucky, lucky girl! What will you do with it?"

"I don't know. I shall not have it for a very long time, you know. And besides, something may happen—— They may find out it isn't worth so much."

"Yes, of course they may," agreed Emily, with unflattering readiness. "We mustn't count upon it. Oh dear! if only they had sent it in this letter! We could have spent it before they had found out."

"Yes, indeed, my dears, we mustn't count upon it," said Aunt Sophy wisely. "Such a princely sum—it is really hardly possible, is it? So we will keep it quite to ourselves, and not say a word to any one—eh?" and she beamed and nodded at her great-nieces.

"Oh, and here's something else!" cried Emily, discovering a postscript. "'In the event of the above arrangements proving agreeable to Mr Turner, Messrs G. & L. would venture to recommend a complete secrecy as to his identity. Any communication he may choose to make to them on the subject will be treated in strict confidence, and withheld, in Mr T.'s own interests, from the public.' So you are to be the Wizard of the South, Miss Lettice—Mr T., I mean!"

"Emily, my dear, it ain't kind to raise false hopes in poor Lettice's heart," said Aunt Sophy reprovingly. "I trust she has too much good sense to be led away, but we must do our best to help her by sedulously

moderating our anticipations. Your sewing is on the floor, my dear."

Emily made a grimace as she picked up the ill-used collar, and to judge by the remarks that burst from her at intervals, her anticipations were not conspicuously moderated. But Mr Tourneur could always be relied upon for a supply of cold water, and when he appeared at supper-time, and Emily informed him triumphantly that Lettice's book was going to be printed, he merely observed, "Well, my dear, we will trust that the intending publisher is a person of substance, and can support the loss." Not even Emily was bold enough to volunteer further information after that, and her father proceeded to exchange his usual genial badinage with Aunt Sophy, contrasting, as he always did, his own onerous labours with the light and purely ornamental occupations of the ladies of his household. Aunt Sophy did not understand half of it, but so long as it pleased him to talk in this perplexing way, she was pleased too. He broke off suddenly.

"Lettice, may I ask why you are regarding me in that peculiarly unpleasant manner? You have fallen into the habit of late, and I dislike it excessively. If I have a smear on my face, I should prefer to be informed of it."

Horribly disconcerted, Lettice mumbled an apology, for it was quite impossible to explain the reason of her offence. Ever since Emily's suggestion that their father was not immortal, a morbid terror had led her to watch his face apprehensively for signs of approaching illness. On this particular evening, by way of improving matters, her mind, still occupied with the hundred pounds, had seen Mr Tourneur impoverished by misfortune of some kind, and in great straits for money. The tableau naturally included a dutiful daughter placing her vast and unsuspected store at her father's disposal, and receiving his blessing, and it faded with great suddenness at the sound of his voice.

Doubtless Messrs Gantley & Lehigh knew literary human nature sufficiently well to anticipate the affirmative reply, tremulous with joy, which reached them from Bliss Turner, Esquire. At any rate, they began to bombard the author with proofs almost immediately. The sight of the long slips distressed Aunt Sophy grievously, and there was hardly a day when she did not repeat her plaintive entreaty that Lettice would write to the publishers—of course with all imaginable deference and politeness—and suggest that the book ought really to be produced on rather better paper, and with the pages not quite so long. There was not the delightful uncertainty as to what the cover would be that distracts the present-day author, for all books that did not rise to the dignity of leather bindings wore a uniform of ribbed cloth, black in the case of theological works, and for light literature a kind of snuffy brown, admirably adapted to conceal the ravages of time and dust, but not inspiring. Expecting nothing better, however, Lettice was not disappointed, and the steel engraving at the opening of the first volume, "Vavasour's emotion on beholding for the first time the castle of his ancestors," would have made amends for much worse. She and Aunt Sophy and Emily gloated over it for days, returning ever and anon to feast their eyes on the fine folds of Vavasour's Spanish cloak, and the noble way in which his hair waved above his lofty brow. A picture like that must, they felt convinced, make the fortune of any book.

In reply to Messrs Gantley & Lehigh's dignified request for confidence, Lettice had confessed her identity, or rather, her insignificance, and they proved themselves worthy of their high standing in the trade by the way they contrived to utilise the truth to further the sale of the book. With a fine sincerity they issued disclaimer after disclaimer to the press, asseverating that *Highpark* was not, as had been so persistently declared, from the pen of the author of *Pelham*, the author of *Granby*, the author of *Trevelyan*,

or the authors of various other eponymous and famous novels. Five or six of these denials were sufficient, for by that time the public had taken the matter into its own hands. Someone—no one ever knew whether the original suggestion came from the publishers or not—had started the idea that the character of Vavasour was drawn from a certain statesman of somewhat stormy reputation. Since the beginning of the present reign Lord Meldreth had been in retirement, but his palmy days were still remembered sufficiently to make him an object of interest to that portion of the community which keeps an observant eye upon, while reprobating, the misdeeds of the great. It was one of his old associates, so the story went, who had declared—with many oaths of a past generation—that no one but Meldreth was ever at once so courtly and so sarcastic, so urbane and so bitter of tongue. The next step was of course to find the writer, and rumour concentrated with malicious haste upon a lady whose name had been associated with that of Lord Meldreth, not by any means to her advantage. The lady was not wholly averse from posing as a literary character, and denied the authorship only in such a way as to suggest that before very long she might acknowledge it. Messrs Gantley & Lehigh waited until the sensation showed signs of subsiding, and then issued another disclaimer:—

“The report that a certain new work contains a delineation of the character of the Earl of M—— from the pen of Lady T——n is absurd in the extreme. Were there no other objection, *the affectionate and benevolent colours* in which Vavasour is depicted would alone suggest that the portrait is *drawn by no female hand.*”

This cruel aspersion on Lord Meldreth's treatment of his lady acquaintances had an immediate effect. It was at once agreed that no woman could have written the book, and the only difficulty was to find a man who could, or would, have used affectionate and

benevolent terms in writing of the Earl of Meldreth. No one could deny that Vavasour—it was quite unnecessary for a hero to possess a Christian name at this date—was an object of admiration to his creator, and it was hard to believe that his reputed original could be an object of admiration to any one. One name after another was put forward and scouted, and the controversy raged merrily, until someone made the happy suggestion that Lord Meldreth himself had commissioned the writing of the book in the hope of leaving a better name behind him. Upon this a bold person of the toady order was discovered, who, taking advantage of a casual invitation given years before, ventured on a pilgrimage to the nobleman's retreat with the express object of eliciting the truth. The result was a fine display of verbal fireworks, from which those interested disentangled the assurance that Lord Meldreth had no hand in the production of the book, but that he could make a very good guess at the "cursed parson fellow" who had written it. The toady, escaping with his life—he had rather doubted whether he would—posted back to London, and with his report added fresh fuel to the fire of conjecture, and incidentally, a fresh lease of life to the book.

The echoes of the controversy which reached Snid-dingly Rectory were so much Greek to its unwitting originator. Ignorant of the ways of the publishing trade, Lettice wondered in vain who put the disclaimers into the papers, and how they knew. The names of the Earl of M—— and Lady T——n conveyed nothing to her, though Aunt Sophy hugged herself in an aggressive silence which implied unutterable things. Lord Meldreth lived in another part of the country, so that his misdoings formed no part of the local gossip, and the lady was one of those who were not mentioned by name, but only in genteel periphrasis—"that unhappy creature," and so on—in clerical circles. Therefore Lettice was hopelessly puzzled, and a good deal disturbed, wondering whether she ought not to write to the papers and protest her

innocence. Emily was as puzzled as herself, but by no means disturbed. A scandal was the very thing to sell the book, she declared, and her judgment was confirmed by a letter from Messrs Gantley & Lehigh, enquiring affectionately after the health of *Marmaduke Garnier*, whose existence they had merely deigned frostily to "note," when it was communicated to them. As for writing to the papers, what was Lettice to say? There was nothing scandalous in the book—indeed, the experienced Emily considered it rather mild—but if people chose to get up a scandal about it, all the author had to do was to be grateful to them.

After the paragraphs and the talk of London came the reviews, and the spreading of the sensation into the country. Not that favourable reviews were to be looked for in any case. In spite of the acceptance of the *Waverley Novels*, fiction was still regarded by the critics as a degraded form of writing, appealing only to the young and foolish of the community, who would be much better without it. Only a dozen years or so were to pass before the great mid-Victorian days—when a new novel from one of the acknowledged masters of the craft demanded two or three columns in the *Times*, and all "Literary Notes" in weekly papers began with bulletins of the progress of the current serials, many of them by writers now totally forgotten—but the autocrats of literature were still trying heroically to sweep back the ocean. The output of novels had increased, was increasing, and in their view ought to be diminished; hence they acted on the maxim that any fool could praise, and the wisest man was he who found the most faults. The space devoted to this exhilarating exercise was considerable—in contrast with the modern ten lines of mis-statement and one of mis-spelling, serving chiefly to show that the reviewer has not read the book. But it is even more disquieting to be blamed at leisure than in haste, and Lettice began to feel herself a criminal of the deepest dye. She could not write, her grammar would disgrace a child from a dame's

school, her views of life were those of the servants' hall, of a conventicle, of a genteel boarding-school (there was a choice here), her plot was hackneyed, her characters were wooden, her sympathy with the poor was hypocritical, and her morals were alternatively non-existent and impossibly severe. Genuinely thankful was she to the publishers for their stipulation of secrecy, for had she been publicly branded as the author of *Highpark* she could not have faced the outer world. As it was, she won through only with the help of Emily, who scoffed at her misery, declaring defiantly that she only wished such an experience had come her way, and edited and doctored the reviews in the most barefaced manner before reading them to Aunt Sophy, who remained blissfully persuaded that dear Lettice had written a sweet tale with a moral of the most exalted order.

But even Emily was taken by surprise sometimes, as on that evening when, sent to summon her father to supper, she came flying back with her finger on her lip.

"Lettice, Papa is reading the book! No, nonsense!" as Lettice showed signs of flight; "he hadn't got it open, but it was lying on his table—close at his elbow—all three volumes. I'll make him say what he thinks of it!"

And regardless of Lettice's imploring looks, she assailed Mr Tourneur suddenly, as soon as he had sat down, with, "Well, Papa, and how do you like Lettice's book?"

"Eh?" said her father, not understanding her. But Lettice, crimson with terror, choked violently, and enlightenment forced itself upon him. "Do you mean to tell me," he asked sharply, "that Lettice wrote *Highpark*?"

"Yes, Papa," said Emily—Lettice was incapable of speech. "You are the proud parent of a popular writer."

"Proud!" burst from Mr Tourneur, with a kind of explosive force. Then his voice became markedly calm. "I must thank you for the information, Emily,

though it comes somewhat late, since Lettice has not seen fit to impart it to me herself."

"But didn't you know, Papa? couldn't you tell?" cried Emily.

"I have not read the book," said Mr Tourneur. He cut his bread thoughtfully into small pieces, all exactly the same size, then looked up with a would-be jaunty air. "Well, my dear, you force me to sacrifice some ten or twelve pages already written. It would not be becoming in me to treat with candour a work penned by a member of my family."

"But you said you hadn't read it, Papa!"

"It is usual, my dear Emily, in serious literary criticism, to occupy a certain amount of space with general considerations—in this case exhibiting the evil results of the invasion of literature by ladies, since I was given to understand the work in question was undoubtedly written by a female. From that I should have proceeded in due order to deal with the book itself."

"But perhaps you would have felt called upon to praise it, Papa?" Emily dared to say.

"My dear, I should never in any circumstances praise a novel."

The sentence was final, and not even Emily ventured to protest against it. Mr Tourneur seemed to have dismissed the subject, but towards the end of the meal he turned suddenly to his elder daughter. "I trust, Lettice, you were not induced to lay down any money in consideration of the appearance of this—er—production?"

"Oh no, Papa!" Lettice was conscious of a mild wonder as to where he thought she could have got the money, but it was swallowed up in gratitude that he asked no further questions. When supper was over, however, and he was lighting the study candle, Mr Tourneur turned to her again.

"There are one or two things I wish to ask you, Lettice." He held the door open for her, and she preceded him out and into the study—a very shrinking

criminal before a very terrible judge. It was no use reminding herself that she was twenty-six years old, that she had a right to occupy her leisure hours as she liked, that all she had written was—or at least was most devoutly intended to be—in strong support of religion and morality; if she lived to be an old woman and the foremost writer in the world, her father's voice and eye would always have the power of making her feel miserably guilty and foolish. Mr Tourneur snuffed the candle, and spoke without looking at her.

"What is this story about your intending a portrait of Lord Meldreth in this book?" he demanded.

"Oh, Papa, I don't know!" Lettice was overwhelmed with relief to find herself arraigned on a point on which her innocence was complete. "Someone must have made it up."

"There is no truth in it, then?"

"How could there be, Papa? I have never seen him in my life. Besides, things don't happen like that. I—I mean, you don't put real people into books."

"It seems to be generally believed that you do," said Mr Tourneur, with the ghost of a smile. "These people—characters—are purely imaginary, then?"

"Oh, quite. Perhaps they may be a little like—sometimes——"

"And you can find interest in inventing purely imaginary adventures for purely imaginary characters, and expect other people to find interest in reading them?"

"Oh, Papa, it's not like that! You don't think about people's reading it when you are writing. It is merely that you have to go on. They ain't imaginary to you; they are as much alive as Aunt Sophy and Emily."

"It is absolutely incomprehensible to me," said Mr Tourneur. "How any sane person can derive pleasure from reading about people who never existed I cannot imagine. But if you find entertainment in inventing these fictions I have no wish to interfere with your pursuits—provided your duties are properly performed."

"Oh, thank you, Papa!" cried Lettice gratefully. Her father raised a warning hand.

"Had I found there was any truth in this rumour about Lord Meldreth I need not say I should have insisted upon the withdrawal of the book, and put a stop to your writing altogether. The novel was sent to me as his relative, and therefore likely to know whether the story was true."

"Is he really, Papa? Aunt Sophy has never said——"

"He and I are second cousins. We have not seen each other for many years. I have no desire to renew the acquaintance—nor, as your aunt knows, to claim credit for the connection. Our paths in life are wisely separated."

"But if you would rather review the book, Papa——"

"It is out of the question. I shall say I am convinced that the story is false, but that family circumstances make it desirable I should not deal with the novel. That is all, I thank you."

"Oh, Papa, if I might just——" Mr Tourneur regarded her with disfavour as she blushed and stammered, and she pulled herself together. "I have all this money, Papa—a whole hundred pounds—and if you would let me do some little thing for you! I thought perhaps if you had a *Times* of your own, instead of having the Squire's passed on to you—I should be so pleased—if you only would——"

"Compose yourself, my dear, I beg. No, I cannot feel that such an indulgence would be justifiable. Were I in a position to make the outlay myself, it would be different. I have no claim on money gained in a way of which I cannot approve, though I may tolerate it."

CHAPTER XVII.

AFTER LONG YEARS.

"Now you will be sensible?" said Emily, gripping the back of Lettice's neck firmly with one hand, while she beat up her pillows with the other. Lettice was just recovering from a severe attack of influenza—as great a scourge in those days as in these—and had been promoted that morning to sitting up in the great chair in her bedroom. Emily had been her nurse, and Emily's methods were bracing.

"Oh no, no!" entreated Lettice faintly. With determination Emily drew up a chair, and sat down opposite her.

"You are not to be silly, Lettice. Now go on with your broth, or I shall feed you myself, and you always make out you don't like that. Of course you are feeling weak and good for nothing at present, but that's the very reason why a visit to Brighton will do you good. And Godmamma won't bother you a bit—I shall have all the trouble of her—for she's horribly afraid of infection, and very likely won't even see you for a fortnight. You will be able to sit out, and read books from the circulating library, or write, just as you please—a nice change for you."

"I don't like changes," pleaded Lettice. "They are always disagreeable—like Agnes's getting married, or Peter's going to sea, or——"

"All changes ain't disagreeable, stupid! Why, your book, and the hundred pounds—that wasn't horrid—

eh? Do you want to stay glued to Sniddingly all your life? They say that most married women have only had one excursion in their lives, and that's the honeymoon journey, but you're worse off, since you are not likely to have a honeymoon."

"It's not only Brighton. Have you forgotten that Mr Gantley made me promise, when he wrote so kindly at Christmas, that if I was ever within reach of London, I would go and stay with them?"

"The very thing! Of course we'll go there. Why, this is better than I expected. Now don't say any more, Lettice; you're going. And those silk dresses that you said we should have out of your money—we'll get them at Brighton, so as to be sure they are in the newest fashion, all ready for London. You won't know yourself when you come back."

"We can't leave home for so long——"

"If Papa and Aunt Sophy can't look after themselves for six weeks, Rebecca and Jerusha will do it for them. You may write out a list of breakfast, dinner, and supper for every day of the six weeks, if you like, before you go; only be quite sure that you're going. Come, if you will make me say it, there's a certain person"—Emily looked down demurely—"who—well, I know he's made up his mind, but he don't quite know it himself yet, and I want him to find it out."

"Oh, Emily, who is it? Hasn't he been coming very often? Whenever I had just dropped asleep in the afternoon, it seemed as if the door-bell woke me, or else the clinking of the glasses as Jerusha took in the cake and wine."

"Oh, several of them have been hanging about, as usual. But I'm not going to tell you who it was, because, you see, he may never find out, after all. And Papa has been quite disagreeable and sarcastic, as if he only came to see *him*! Really, he might have been talking to you. So I am going to put an end to it. Some people would say the best thing was to make him jealous, but I know

better. That would very likely frighten him away altogether."

"Oh, Emily!" sighed Lettice despairingly. To the end of her days she would never fathom Emily's methods with her lovers, or see how the strings were pulled to which the puppets danced. They were so businesslike, somehow.

"And then there's another thing," pursued Emily. "Aunt Sophy wanted to keep it from you, but I think you ought to know. Gilbert's coming home."

Ever afterwards Lettice thought she knew what it was like to die—the sudden ebbing of blood from the heart which left one unable to move or speak. Emily was very severe with her as she slapped her hands vigorously, and only desisted from fetching feathers and burning them under her nose because the resulting smell would have been certain to bring Aunt Sophy upstairs. The blood returned to brow and cheek as suddenly as it had left them, and Lettice protested confusedly.

"It's not that, Emily—not what you think. He has no thought of it—nor have I. But we were great friends, you know."

"I know," said Emily grimly. "Well, he is coming home—only a visit, of course—a business visit, but he will run down to the Hall for a short time, and Mrs Berringer was very ill-natured when she told me about it."

"Oh yes, I can guess. 'My dear son will be here such a short time that we want him to ourselves. So you won't be surprised if I ask you not to come in while he is here, my love?'"

"How well you mimic her! She talks exactly like that," said Emily, and never betrayed that what Mrs Berringer had really said, with a geniality that sat oddly upon her, was, "I should like my dear son to make the acquaintance of his mother's sweet companion. So come in to dinner the night he arrives, my love, will you?" To which Emily had replied promptly that she was sorry, but she would be at

Brighton—and made up her mind that Lettice should be there too.

“I should have liked to see him—even if it was only from the window,” murmured Lettice, but Emily was adamant.

“Even if you have no spirit,” said she, “I have; and I should wish us both to be away while he is here.”

How Emily contrived to bring Mr Tourneur and Aunt Sophy round to her views, Lettice neither knew nor cared to ask, but within a fortnight the two sisters were established at Brighton, on a visit to Miss Housman, a spare elderly lady who owned a barouche, a pair of fat horses, a well-nourished coachman and footman, an apoplectic spaniel, a shrewish elderly maid, and other proper appurtenances of spinsterhood and wealth. She was very fond of Emily, but objected strongly to meeting Lettice until all fear of infection was removed, and for the first ten days they only saw each other when the weather was fine enough to allow the carriage to be open. Lettice was shy of her, with the uncomfortable shyness of the poverty-stricken in presence of the prosperous, and would have been quite satisfied had her exclusion lasted longer. Emily was expected to breakfast with their patroness in her room and amuse her with conversation, but afterwards, while Miss Housman recruited exhausted nature with a nap, they took the regulation walk up and down the Cliff, or went to the library, attended by the footman for protection and to carry the books. The maid was detailed to accompany them when they went to choose the silks—the first silk gowns they had ever possessed, save that Miss Housman had made Emily hideous, as a child of five, by the gift of a gaudy French poplin frock in an impossible tartan. Now the duenna looked on grimly while Lettice chose the tint of which she had always dreamt—a fawn-colour with a reddish tinge which brought out a little brightness in her pale face and showed to advantage her dark eyes and hair.

Emily was more adventurous, and after endless choices and changes settled upon the very newest introduction from France—a white silk printed with huge bouquets of flowers in such wise that the pattern was very thick and solid at the foot of the skirt, and tapered into light and graceful trails towards the waist. Drawn silk bonnets they bought, too—not like Aunt Sophy's, but in the new shape called a capote, with flowers as trimming outside and set in a cap of blonde lace under the brim, small pink roses for Lettice and forget-me-nots for Emily—and Miss Housman was so much pleased with the effect that she made them completely fashionable by the gift of pink parasols, the acme of smartness, very small and domelike in shape.

Lettice was not lonely even when Emily was in attendance on her godmother. She had her book to finish, for the influenza had wrought havoc with the fortunes of poor *Marmaduke Garnier* just as they were approaching a climax. In spite of Aunt Sophy's extreme anxiety to know what happened, and Emily's rather patronising interest, Lettice could not put two words together—and this was the more unfortunate because Messrs Gantley & Lehigh were begging that the book might be submitted to them in good time, with a view to publication in the autumn. At first the author thought despairingly that the power of writing had left her altogether, but after a day or two of rest from home cares, of sun and air and luxury, of making up innumerable life-histories for units of the unknown crowd who passed and repassed, she realised with a joyful shock that *Marmaduke Garnier* had resumed his former commanding position in her mind. His story was weaving itself anew, reaching its appointed conclusion with calm disregard of the knots and kinks which had appeared to be obstacles impossible to circumvent, and her business was merely to write it down, which she did in less than a week of busy happy days occupied with little else.

It was well that this important task was satis-

factorily disposed of, for the next week brought a sensation which diverted Lettice's thoughts inevitably from the ideal to the actual. Gilbert had landed in England, and she followed his doings with painful interest. Undeterred by the obvious disapproval of the grim attendant, she violated all the canons of ladylike behaviour, and bought a paper every day, that she might know exactly where he was. She shared the triumph which awaited him in London, where he was entertained at banquets, received the Freedom of the City in a gold box, and addressed gatherings of persons of substance and leading. Her heart leaped at the discreet paragraph which intimated that it was highly probable Her Majesty would be pleased to confer upon him some signal mark of distinction, and palpitated painfully when she read other discreet paragraphs hinting that it was not quite roses all the way, but that there was a certain amount of ill-feeling in some circles towards Berringer of Bandeir. She had to buy a different paper—a Sussex one this time—when she desired to read how "Captain Berringer arrived at Sniddingly Hall for a brief sojourn under the paternal roof," and how "on descending from the coach he was welcomed by the villagers, headed by the Rev. Mr Tourneur, Rector of the parish, who in a few felicitous phrases expressed the sentiments of those present towards a gentleman whose distinguished career they had watched with so much admiration." It was impossible not to wonder whether any thought of their last meeting, and the very different sentiments expressed on that occasion, crossed the minds of Mr Tourneur and Gilbert. At any rate, whatever awkwardness Gilbert might feel, Lettice was assured that her father would be fully equal to the occasion, and without turning a hair would meet Gilbert afterwards at dinner, and take wine with him.

The Brighton visit was so pleasant that Lettice was doubly regretful when the time came for her and Emily to move on. Meeting strangers was always

a trial to her, and she had never seen any of the Gantley family in her life, nor even known anybody who had seen them. She was convinced that they would be extremely fashionable, and look down distressingly on the two young women from the country who were ignorant of their shibboleths. Emily, on the other hand, declared that they would be rich, dull and dowdy—successful tradespeople, worthy, no doubt, but of the type that ought to feel itself distinctly honoured by the visit of the Misses Tourneur. Miss Housman was most curious to know how they had become acquainted with such people, and it is to be feared that Emily put her off the scent by various hints as to Lettice's tracts, which might, of course—only nothing of the sort was in contemplation—be about to appear in a volume, under the highest Episcopal auspices. Miss Housman was much interested, and gave Emily authority to put her name down for five guineas if the book was to be brought out by subscription, promising to distribute the resulting copies among the many clergymen of her acquaintance. Moreover, she waxed so regretful over the absence from Brighton, owing to consumptive tendencies and a voyage to Madeira, of her favourite among these, that Emily discerned a distinct intention on her part to bring him at some future time in contact with Lettice, "such a good inoffensive creature, so suitable for a poor clergyman's wife." Since Lettice had reached an age when the refusal of such a position would have been considered to be flying in the face of Providence, Emily was thankful to get her away without the clash of wills that must have resulted had the curate been at hand and amenable. Miss Housman sent the footman with them to London, with directions not to quit them till he had delivered them into the hands of the Gantleys. She herself, when she travelled by rail, did so in her own barouche, mounted in state upon a truck; but a reserved first-class carriage, with John Thomas looking in upon them at every station, ought to be safe enough for

two quietly-dressed young women who displayed no evidence of wealth. Emily liked the precautions, because they made her feel like a princess travelling incognito, and Lettice was such a coward about speaking to strangers that she would have welcomed any restriction that made it unnecessary. As it was, she made her entry at the Gantleys' so completely under Emily's wing and in her train that the family accepted the younger sister without question as the elder. It was not until Mrs Gantley, a pleasant kindly woman, anxious to draw out the shy nobody after dinner, succeeded to admiration in a real heart-to-heart talk on household matters, that the truth appeared. Lettice and her hostess had discovered an unsuspected bond of union in a common complaint against the accepted method of renovating worn sheets. You might spend hours in cutting them in half lengthwise and sewing them together again with the sides to the middle, and then your ungrateful family would object to using them, on the ground that the seam was uncomfortable.

"When they are far too good to turn over to the servants!" said Mrs Gantley with indignation. "But nobody who is not a housekeeper ever thinks of that. Your dear sister, now—it would never occur to her, one can see it at a glance. Her eye, her whole dashing air—you don't mind my calling it that?—bespeak just the spirit one would expect, don't they? I'm sure, when I first read *Highpark*, I said to myself, 'This is written by one of those creatures one hears about from America, who talk about the rights of women,' but your sister carries it off so charmingly. Anybody can see at once that her fastness is all on the surface, and when Mr Right comes along she will settle down as nicely as possible."

"Would you call Emily fast?" asked Lettice almost inaudibly. Mrs Gantley wondered what had been said to make her look so unhappy, and arrived swiftly at the conclusion that she was overwhelmed by the accusation.

"Oh, well, it's rather ill-natured to say so, ain't it?" she said kindly. "But that spirited manner, you see, and her assured air—and the book, above all—— But there! we know it will all wear off, don't we?"

"But—I wrote the book." Lettice had risen to her feet, and was looking down at her hostess with such a world of guilt and misery in her eyes as would have befitted the confession of some enormous crime. Even Mrs Gantley was staggered for the moment as she swiftly reviewed the incidents of the arrival of two strange young ladies, one of them very self-possessed and the other very much the reverse, and the meekness with which Lettice had accepted the inferior room assigned to her. Then, being a sensible woman, and happily possessed of a sense of humour, she laughed.

"Well, well!" she said. "To think of our all having been taken in like this! It was very naughty of your sister to play such a trick on us, and you must really scold her, my dear Miss Tourneur. But pray don't make yourself so unhappy about it. Mr Gantley would say your eyes reminded him of Mrs Siddons in *Lady Macbeth*. He remembers seeing her when he was a boy. You must make him tell you about it."

Lettice sat down again, very white, for had not a new fault been discovered in her unfortunate novel? Her equanimity was gone for the evening—not even Mrs Gantley's skilful leading of the conversation to varying methods of jam-making could restore it—and at last her hostess, in sheer pity, remembered that she must have found the train journey trying, and asked her if she would like to go to bed.

It was an unfortunate beginning to the visit, but happily it was not typical. Possibly by a preconcerted arrangement, Mr Gantley devoted himself at breakfast the next morning to chaffing Emily on her supposed deliberate impersonation of the successful author, and Emily took his jokes in such good part, and carried the war into the enemy's country with so much gusto, that Lettice was forced to laugh, and quite forgot to be shy. Then there were so many things she had to

see, some of which Emily had seen before when in London with Miss Housman, but more were new to both of them. They were taken to the Academy and the Flower Show at the Royal Botanical Gardens, and to "breakfasts"—which meant garden-parties—innumerable, shown the Thames Tunnel, the uncompleted Houses of Parliament, and the chaos of preparation in Hyde Park for the Great Exhibition of next year. They saw the statue of the Duke of Wellington, newly elevated on its uneasy perch, and they saw the Duke himself—a bent old gentleman riding a small cob, and acknowledging curtly the lifted hats of the spectators. They saw the Queen and Prince Albert and two of the Royal children driving in the Park, and Lettice went back burning with more enthusiastic loyalty than ever, and was silent all evening, seeing visions of service done to the reigning house. But this evening was an exception, for the Gantleys' house was such a popular one that she was becoming accustomed to meeting people, and even to talking to them. Her eyes no longer held a look of furtive terror when a stranger was introduced to her—nay, she would even venture to sit down by, and try to make conversation with, any one who seemed lonely or deserted. The secret of the authorship of *Highpark* was still rigorously kept, so that people who considered Emily "a fine amusing creature" wondered why she took that plain sister about with her—but this was well, since all Lettice's hard-gained *aplomb* would have forsaken her had she been proclaimed the writer of that lavishly-blamed work. Thus matters continued to improve until the last night of their stay, when, by way presumably of speeding the parting guests, Mrs Gantley gave a musical party.

Lettice was not musical, and she had fallen naturally by this time into the position of her hostess's right hand, so that she took her place as a matter of course on a rout-seat in rather draughty proximity to the door, where she might encourage late arrivals to go

forward and find Mrs Gantley nearer the front. Under cover of a very long, and to her dreary, pianoforte solo she had fallen into her old habit of dreaming, and was busy making up an imaginary history for an elderly gentleman of military appearance and a very young lady seated immediately before her, when two men came in, and stayed exchanging occasional whispered remarks with Mr Gantley instead of finding seats. They were as stiffly collared and as tightly strapped as the other gentlemen present, but their brown faces had an open-air look and their eyes a glance of command which marked them out from the rest. Lettice had just made this observation and settled herself to watch them, with great contentment, when the paler of the two turned in her direction, and she saw that it was Gilbert. She had no time even to be embarrassed, for he was shaking hands with her almost as soon as their eyes met.

"Why, Lettice!" he was saying. "At last! I thought we should never meet. Think of finding you here!"

"Hush!" she said quickly, for the people near were turning round to look, some reprovably, others possibly rejoiced to find themselves relieved from the necessity of listening to the music.

"Oh, come out!" he said impatiently. "I know you don't care to listen to this caterwauling any more than I do. Where can we have a talk?"

"We will go into the conservatory," said Lettice, striving hard to maintain a calm and equable aspect, as of one greeting a mere acquaintance. But all her pulses were beating tumultuously, for here was still the old Gilbert, taking possession of her regardless of conventionalities and sweeping her away as if nothing had ever sundered them. He took up the black lace shawl that slipped from her shoulders as she rose, and put it round her.

"Not Aunt Sophy's Spanish shawl?" he whispered.

"Yes, of course. But how could you remember, after all these years?"

"You forget how I have studied the pattern Sunday after Sunday in church, when Miss Tourneur sat with the Sunday-school children, as they tell me you do now, on the benches just below our pew. That's right, Lettice; now we can talk." They were safely inside the conservatory, and the sound of the music was dulled. His eyes swept over her, taking in the plain banded hair, with the red rose Emily had fastened into it low down on the left side, the silk gown with its plain net tucker, and the neatly gloved hands which held fan and handkerchief. Then he smiled. "Lettice in gloves!" he said. "Lettice a fashionable lady! But not changed—not a day older. And the same good kind Lettice as ever!"

"Gilbert, how absurd you are!" Embarrassment made Lettice inconceivably brave. "You can't know much of fashionable ladies if you think I am one. And I am eight years older than when you left England."

His face changed, became troubled. "Eight years!" he said. "Yes, but they have been taken from your age and added to mine. But we will not be doleful to-night. Listen, Lettice; I know why you are here!"

"Nay, Gilbert," she protested. "What can you mean?"

"I know who wrote *Highpark*. Did you think you could deceive me? Oh, I have not left off reading, I assure you! My agents have orders to send me all the best new books, and when I read yours I could have fancied I heard your voice speaking. And your father, too—I recognised him at once in Vavasour."

Lettice eyed him with dismay. "Oh, Gilbert, pray, pray don't! Already people persist in saying that Vavasour is a Lord Somebody of whom I never heard, and now you say he is Papa! Believe me, he is no one—only himself."

"Well, you ought to know, if any one should. Oh, Lettice!—ain't I an idiot? I want to sit and look at you, and say, 'Oh, Lettice, Lettice!' over and over

again—nothing more. And to think that but for Blanchard's persistence I should not have come here to-night—should not have met you!”

“Was the gentleman with you Captain Blanchard of the *Neæra*?” asked Lettice, with rather excessive enthusiasm, but he did not resent it.

“The same—excellent fellow! He is publishing a narrative of his cruise, which will help us, I trust, in Bandeir. Gantley is the publisher, hence the invitation, hence this happy meeting. I shall be doubly grateful to him in future.”

“Gilbert, I think we ought to go back to the drawing-room. Mrs Gantley will be looking for me. Here she comes.”

“But I must see you. When can we meet? I have innumerable things—— No, you must fix a time.”

“Sometimes I—take Mrs Gantley's dog for a run in the Park after breakfast,” owned Lettice, restrained from departing by a brown hand gripping her dress.

“Then do it to-morrow,” said Gilbert, just as Mrs Gantley came in with elaborate unconcern.

“So good of you to entertain Sir Gilbert, my dear Miss Tourneur! What, you are old friends?”

“*Sir* Gilbert?” asked Lettice, astonished.

“Just come up from Windsor,” growled Gilbert.

“But really,” pursued Mrs Gantley, lightly, “Sir Gilbert must not monopolise you. I have Mr Vernor here”—this was a famous novelist—“who has heard a rumour about—well, we know what—and is longing to make your acquaintance, and Lady Erringham has begged that Sir Gilbert may be presented to her.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

THROUGH ANOTHER MAN'S EYES.

THE hearts of the nursemaids who were pulling go-carts or dragging unwilling infants by the hand in the Park the next morning were fluttered by the apparition of a sunburnt gentleman in a loose blue coat and nankeen trousers, who strode along, casting lightning glances under every bonnet he met. At last he arrived at a lady in brown — brown and white cambric dress, brown silk *pardessus*, straw bonnet with brown ribbon — who was attended by a handsome brown spaniel on a lead, and they shook hands and walked on together, then found chairs in a secluded corner. Lettice made polite conversation nervously, for Gilbert would say nothing — only lean forward with his hands folded upon the top of his cane, and stare into vacancy. Suddenly he turned round upon her.

"You can talk," he said, "and well you may. It isn't easy for a man to confess that he's been a fool."

"But have I asked you to confess it?"

"No, but it's due to you. I suppose there was pride in it — I don't know — it seemed the right thing, the only thing, to do, but — That letter, I mean, which I wrote to Agnes, and she showed to you, as — Heaven forgive me! — I meant her to."

With a rush there returned upon Lettice the memory of that bitter night, when with a burning heart she had battled through snow and tempest less unkind than man's ingratitude, and there returned also some-

thing of the consuming indignation she had felt then. "It was a cruel letter," she said, her voice vibrating with pain, "and it made me very miserable for a long time. And I had done nothing to deserve it."

"I know. I suppose it's no excuse to say that I punished myself more than I punished you?"

"It may be an excuse, but it would not be true."

"Yes, it would!" he said, with startling energy. "There you are wrong, Lettice. I lost you; you only lost me."

"It is you who are wrong," she contradicted him passionately. "In losing you I lost everything—hope, interests, the chance of seeing something of all the wonders that I used to long to see in those days. You only lost what you thought you could very well do without. All the rest you kept."

"I see. And it makes no difference that the thing I thought I could do without was the only thing that made all the rest worth while?"

"I can only say that all these years it has seemed to make no difference to you. Come back, Pompey!" with a tug at the lead, for the spaniel was desirous of exploring beyond his restricted range.

"Can't you spare your attention from that abominable beast for a moment? What can I say, Lettice? If you knew the number of times I have written letters to you and torn them up! I felt as if I could not go on any longer without your sympathy—your advice."

"Well, never mind!" said Lettice cheerfully. "You tore them up, you see, and got on very well without the sympathy and advice. It's rather a pity to tell me about it, isn't it? Had you kept silence, I need never have been flattered by knowing that you thought of me at all. And really, though you are kind enough to talk about feeling the need of my advice, you never took it when you could get it, did you?"

"Pray go on!" muttered Gilbert savagely. "I deserve it all."

"You do," agreed Lettice, in the most matter-of-

fact voice of which she was capable, and gazed hard across the Park lest the tears should escape from her eyes. "Come here, Pompey!" with a violent pull at the lead. "What are you doing?"

"If you talk to that dog again, I'll cut the lead," said Gilbert.

"Well, really," said Lettice, with great unconcern, "since I came out to give him a run, and there don't seem anything more to say—does there?—I may as well be going on." Anything to have her back to Gilbert, and be able to get at her pocket!

"Stay where you are," said Gilbert gruffly. "Can I oblige you with a handkerchief?" He produced an enormous bandana from his pocket, to the great interest of a small boy and two small girls standing near, who appeared to regard him as a conjuror, edging gradually closer. He smiled at them in a friendly manner. "You want to play with this nice bowwow?" he enquired. "Well, you may take him a run to the end of the walk, and if you bring him back safe, you shall have a whole silver sixpence to spend on lollipops!" He disengaged the lead calmly from Lettice's fingers, regardless of her incoherent protest, and handed it to the little boy, who immediately set off at a run. "Now do pray go on," he said suavely to Lettice, who was far too fully occupied in pretending she was not crying to say anything. "You shall never say that I fought shy of hearing all the very worst you wanted to say of me. I have said I deserve it, and I do. Come, let us have it! Because, you see, when you have finished, there's something I want to say."

"If you think it's kind to make fun—or right——" protested Lettice brokenly.

"Who's making fun? Not your humble servant, I assure you. The only funny thing I can see is that you should think you can say anything worse to me than I have been saying to myself for seven years. And I would rather you said it to me—you can't wonder at that. So please say anything appropriate that occurs to you."

"I wish I could, since you seem to like it!" sighed Lettice, with extreme exasperation.

"Like it? I enjoy it! If you could for a moment imagine what it is to me to sit here, on a summer morning, in an English park, with dirty little leaves coming out on the trees, and smutty lilacs in bloom behind railings, and find a bit of your dress blown over my knees"—Lettice twitched her flounces away indignantly—"and hear your voice scolding me—why, you'd—well, I don't know. I suppose you would think scolding too good for me—eh, is that it?"

Lettice gave up her attempt in despair. "I don't know—it seems as if you wouldn't understand," she said hopelessly. "I suppose you will never see what—yes, you may laugh if you like—what you have made me suffer, there!—these eight years, because you don't want to see it. It's horribly unfair, but there it is."

"What is unfair, Lettice?" gently.

"The whole thing was unfair. It was a matter that concerned both of us equally, and you took it upon yourself to put an end to it without so much as a pretence of consulting me—exactly as Papa would have done. No doubt it was very silly of me to expect anything else. And now you laugh at me for minding. That's very silly too, of course. But ladies are always silly, ain't they? And now I really must go back——"

"Not just yet. Take him another run, and you shall have another sixpence!" he called to the small boy, who scampered up with Pompey in a high state of delight. As they ran off again, the little girls toiling behind, he turned again to Lettice. "Five minutes at the outside, Lettice. How am I to get in all I have to say? No. I don't laugh at you—Heaven forbid! I know too well you are justified in all you say. How can I make you understand? When I wrote that letter, I was—not mad, but exalted, if you know what I mean. Honestly, I didn't expect to live more than a year, if so long. I had the feeling that I was marked out to redeem Bandeir, that I must

give up all thoughts of everything that might interfere with the one work. The feeling came first when your father sent me about my business; it drove me to Bandeir then, and when, as I thought, I got my death-sentence and the opportunity of doing all I had planned at the same time, I could think of nothing else. Of course I was a fool. I ought to have known that if I had never been able to do without your help before, I was not likely to in the future. I was a self-sufficient, bragging fool. But it was truly the hardest course to take. And I have suffered too, Lettice."

"But—it was your own doing," persisted Lettice.

"I know; but would you say that made it any easier to bear? I assure you it's a hundredfold worse. At least you had no need to reproach yourself. And then, to crown all, I find that my tremendous sacrifice has not been a benefit to Bandeir, but the reverse."

"Oh, Gilbert!" The unwonted spasm of self-assertion was over, and Lettice had fallen back into her natural attitude.

"I am telling you the truth. Only the other day a horrid thing happened in the palace, among Yusuf's women. I couldn't even tell you what it was, but when a thing of that kind gets talked about among the people at large, you may be sure it's something very spicy indeed. I pulled Yusuf up about it, talked to him in a way that would have riled any other Malay I know beyond forgiveness, but he was as sweet-tempered as ever. He had nothing to do with it, he told me—and I knew that, of course—it was all the women, just the sort of thing they had always done, and would always think it natural to do. He himself could see it was wrong, but only because he had learnt to look at things as I did, and who was to teach the women that? They would not listen to him, they would not listen to me; the only person they would look at was a woman of their own rank; why didn't I bring out a wife from home? You may imagine I laughed at that, remembering how I had

given up all thoughts of marriage for the sake of Yusuf and Bandeir, and I told him no white woman could stand the climate, so it would mean my going away altogether.—Look here, my sweet child; you shall have a shilling as well as a sixpence if you'll only run off again.—Well, that shut him up, but the next thing I heard was that two of my assistants—Petherton, who came out with me in the *Golden Helen*, and Charles's friend Unwin—wanted leave. What for? To go home and get married, if you please! and bring their wives out. I raved at them for wanting to kill two innocent English ladies, but they had everything cut and dried. Fine hill country within easy reach, a trip to sea possible at any time, climate understood and dangers guarded against, and so on. All they wanted was a doctor in residence at Bandeir, so that patients hadn't to go and hunt for him away among the tribes, and a doctor was one of the things I was coming home to look for. I went into the matter with them precious thoroughly, not wishing to have female blood on my head, and I had to give in. They are on their way out now, and their wives won't be the only ladies there either. I want to take out Donnellan and Agnes to begin the mission we have waited for so long, and he is only consulting his family and the Bishop before answering definitely."

"Agnes!" gasped Lettice.

"Yes; just her line, ain't it? I have had the sites for the church and mission-house marked out for years, and now that I've got the Padri we shall turn all hands to building. I don't know whether I shall be able to wait long enough for them to go out with me, but if not, they must follow. What do you think of Bandeir society now? nobby—eh? Well, Lettice"—he held out his hand—"is there any chance for me after all, or not?"

"Oh, Gilbert, you know——" she began, then stopped in a panic, and released her hand resolutely from his. "But, Gilbert, I am not free—no more

free than I was eight years ago. I can't be spared from home."

"Not spared?" he echoed in astonishment, waving away the children for another run, too much pre-occupied to increase his bribes. "But surely Emily is old enough to take your place? She must be grown-up by this time." He tried to make a calculation, but failed. "No, I don't remember precisely, but I am certain my mother spoke as if she was grown-up. She talked a lot about her, but I was not listening. It was you I wanted to hear about."

"Oh, Emily is grown-up; she is twenty. Didn't you see her last night—in white with a blue gauze scarf?"

"I saw no one but you, but that must be the girl Blanchard was raving about. He had mislaid the hostess, and couldn't find any one to tell him who the charmer was. Twenty—eh? Well, that's older than you were when you began to keep house, so there you are."

"But Emily will marry—she is sure to. Even now I believe there is someone——"

"Emily may marry—in her turn, and have my blessing. But at present there's no question of that. You have had eight years of looking after your father and Aunt Sophy, and I want you more than they do."

"Nay, Gilbert, believe me, I can't leave them. Aunt Sophy is very feeble—she was quite crippled with rheumatism last winter. And Papa!—oh, Emily would never be able to arrange things to please him. I have studied his tastes——"

"Well, now you are going to study mine, for a change. It's no use, Lettice. There's no question of duty this time. You are more wanted in Bandeir than at Sniddingly."

"Take care!" said Lettice. "You are trying to decide for me again."

"How can a man help it, when he knows that if he allows you the least loophole you will sacrifice

yourself and him? The real truth of it is, you don't trust me."

"Gilbert, how unkind! how unjust! How can you?"

"How can I help seeing it? It's uncommon natural, I confess. You can't forget the way I treated you, and you don't feel it safe to marry me."

"Gilbert, that is not true, and you know it."

"Oh, very well; prove it, then."

"I will. I will speak to Emily at once, and find out whether her heart is really engaged. If not—if she is willing to take my place——"

"You will come back with me!" broke in Gilbert ecstatically.

"But if she has arrived at an understanding with the gentleman, whoever he be—— Then I must stay, Gilbert. I can't subject Emily to what I have suffered."

"You think more of Emily than me," he said grumpily.

"Nay, you must always come first in my thoughts. But you and I have learnt patience, I trust. Poor Emily never has."

"It's uncommon flattering to know I am first in your thoughts when I am on the other side of the world. But I suppose I may be thankful you don't tell me in so many words that I have ruined your life, and you ain't going to let me ruin Emily's. Well, let us get back. Not much good staying here."

"Gilbert!" she said entreatingly.

"It's no good saying 'Gilbert!' in that shocked voice. Every word you say shows me convincingly that you haven't the slightest notion what love means. What can you know of the times and times I have felt I must drown myself or blow out my brains if I couldn't see you at once? I wonder the walls of my room have not got 'Lettice' branded into the posts, I have spoken your name so often. That wretched little portrait of you which I stole from Agnes I have carried about with me constantly—I have it on me now. And you don't mind in the least."

"I do mind, very much. It is the greatest comfort to know that you were not really as cruel as you seemed. But I must care for what is right more than I do for you—nothing can alter that. Why, Gilbert, it is the same with you. You thought you were doing right when you wrote that letter. How can you ask me to do what I feel is wrong?"

"But I found out I was mistaken. Besides——" he broke off, and laughed unwillingly. "No, you have me there, Lettice. Right, for you and me, is what I think right, do you see? Instinctive tyranny of the male mind, I suppose, and you won't stand it—eh?—well, please yourself, and I must grin and bear it, but don't expect me to like it."

"Dear Gilbert!" Her hand stole inside his arm, and pressed it gently. He rose roughly, almost shaking off her touch.

"For Heaven's sake, don't do that, unless you want me to catch you up and run away with you this moment! Now where are my juvenile pensioners? What a bill I must have run up! Here, young shaver, will this make us quits?" He held out a half-crown, which was received by the boy in awestruck silence, and by the little girls with squeals of delight. Dropping Pompey's lead, they set off together helter-skelter, pursued by their late playfellow with loud and joyful barks. Gilbert chased and recaptured him, and returned rather out of breath.

"I'm not what I was," he admitted, "but there's a good bit of life in me yet, I assure you. Just let me know that you are free to marry me, and see if I don't come racing back from Bandeir at a pace fit to make the old *Helen* carry away her sticks."

Lettice's attention was momentarily distracted. They were pacing slowly side by side, her arm lightly through his, as was the proper thing when a lady and gentleman walked together, and coming towards them along the walk was a black and white figure that seemed familiar. She turned to Gilbert almost entreatingly. "It is Papa," she said. "He must have come to

London to escort us home. It is—very kind of him.” Gilbert felt the impulse on her part to remove her arm from his, but realised with a thrill of pride that she was keeping it there. Mr Tourneur’s face did not wear the expected frown, however.

“You are very wise to take an early walk this beautiful morning, my dear,” he said, after the first greetings.

“And did you really come all this way so that we might not have to travel home alone, Papa?” asked Lettice.

“Well, not precisely, my dear. That was one of my objects, it is true, but I did not make the journey alone. I had the pleasure of a companion.”

Gilbert had a moment’s wild vision of a second marriage on Mr Tourneur’s part, which might set Lettice unexpectedly free. “I—I am glad to hear it was a pleasant companion, sir,” he said.

“The pleasantest in the world, my dear Gilbert, save for a little natural impatience, which interfered slightly with our appreciation of the luxuries of modern travel. It was our good friend Ralph Sedhurst.”

“But what should he be impatient about?” asked Gilbert in perplexity, but Lettice gasped. She knew. Ralph Sedhurst was Sir John’s eldest son, already possessed of a fine property inherited from his mother’s brother, and heir to as much more and the baronetcy, but hitherto a confirmed bachelor. She could have anticipated her father’s reply.

“All the effect of the little god’s shafts, my dear fellow. Emily wrote her aunt such a glowing description of the London gaieties as stirred our backward lover to the liveliest fear of rivals. He made his proposals to me yesterday, and nothing would serve but that we must post off to town immediately and clinch the matter. All my assurances that Emily was unlikely to frown upon a suitor favoured by her father were in vain. His agitation was so pitiable that I consented to be swept away by it. We slept in the City last night, and I have now left him with Emily. We

must not tell tales, but I may say she was enchanted to see him."

Lettice drew a long shuddering breath. "And will they—will they be married soon, Papa?"

"Sedhurst was urging the claims of an early day next week when I left them," replied Mr Tourneur pleasantly. "I imagine, however, that the interval will extend to a month. Do I see your countenance darken, Lettice? Is it possible you can be jealous of a sister's happiness?"

"I had just asked Lettice to marry me, sir," said Gilbert.

"And I will give Lettice the credit of replying that she could not be spared from home."

"Not necessarily, sir. If Emily remained at home——"

"There is no use in suggesting impossibilities, my good fellow. I have given my consent to Emily's marriage with a gentleman of high position and lofty character, and I am not likely to withdraw it, especially in order to further the union of Lettice with—I don't use the word in an invidious sense—an adventurer."

"Papa!" cried Lettice quickly; "Gilbert was knighted yesterday."

"I am quite aware of the fact, my dear. And I am also aware that Her Majesty's gracious action does not meet with universal approbation. Bandeir don't stand very high in City estimation—eh, Gilbert?"

"That I shall soon set right. Ridding has made promises in my name which far exceeded his powers," said Gilbert hastily. "It's a mere matter of putting things on the right basis. But if you imply that I could not keep a wife, sir——"

"My dear Gilbert, I imply nothing. The hypothesis has no practical bearing, and ain't likely to have any."

"Because," pursued Gilbert resolutely, "I should propose to settle on Lettice the whole of the property my grandmother left me last year—something like ten thousand pounds."

"Your intentions would be most generous were there

any chance of putting them to the test. But there is none."

"Pray, sir, is it impossible that Lettice should decide to secure her own happiness, as Emily has secured hers?"

"Impossible? Yes, it is impossible. I may not have been able to provide for my daughters what the world calls wealth, but at least I have made it impossible for them to prefer a selfish and delusive happiness to the claims of duty."

"Perhaps you will have the goodness to apply that to Emily——" began Gilbert hotly, but Lettice laid her hand upon his arm.

"Do you mind walking on a little, Papa? I should like to speak to Gilbert."

"Pray do so, my dear. I have perfect confidence in your decision." And Mr Tourneur walked on—a noticeable figure at whom many turned to look, as he scanned his surroundings and the people he met with bright active eyes.

"It is good-bye, Gilbert," said Lettice.

"It need not be," he replied doggedly. "If you will only let me make arrangements——"

"Nay, Gilbert, you know as you say it that is out of the question. But what I wanted to say was—this is really good-bye, not for eight years only."

"Nonsense! what are you talking about?"

"We must give up all thought—I may not be free for thirty—forty years. And you need some one to take care of you. Truly, Gilbert, I want you to marry someone else."

"Perhaps you will add to your kindness by telling me who?"

"How can I say? There are so many. Anybody would be glad—— But at any rate, there must be some one you would like. And believe me, I would rather you went back married than alone."

"Are you mad, Lettice? Just understand this, if you please. I shall not marry any one else. I shall go back alone, and remain alone until I can come home

and fetch you. And meanwhile, I shall write to you by every mail, and you must write to me."

Then Lettice hardened her heart to the most tremendous sacrifice of all. "No, you must not write. I shall not. It would keep your mind fixed on me, and I want you—I want you—to turn to someone else. I ask it of you. Remember, I want you to do it."

Leaving Gilbert standing dumb, she went swiftly forward, trembling from head to foot, and took her father's arm to go back to the Gantleys'. Back to the triumphant Ralph Sedhurst, whom it was necessary for Mr Tourneur forcibly to take out for a walk, if Emily was ever to get her things packed. Back to Emily, confessing prettily that dear Ralph was the laggard suitor whose slowness had caused her anxiety, and passing after a brief period of rapture to practical considerations. She would have Rebecca's niece in the house for a fortnight to make her gowns—only the skirts being left to amateur manufacture. As there were nine widths of material in a skirt, and every flounce involved many yards of hemming and whipping, it was difficult for Lettice to express enthusiasm at the prospect, though she fully recognised its wisdom.

"And when I have once swept into Sniddingly church on dear Ralph's arm, for Mrs Berringer to behold, with my own footman behind me carrying my books, I can die happy!" concluded Emily impressively.

CHAPTER XIX.

A MOST PERFECT WIFE.

EMILY did not allow her good fortune to turn her head. Aunt Sophy said it was truly wonderful to see the discretion with which the dear girl behaved, though just a little disappointing to friends who had naturally looked forward to a grand wedding. With her usual shrewd good sense, she vetoed any attempt to vie with the Berringers' display when Agnes was married. She would have no bridesmaids—this was really in order to spare her father's purse, though Mrs Berringer said it was that no one should have a chance of outshining the bride. The school-children, in clean print frocks and well-smoothed hair, scattered flowers in her path, and Lettice was able to wear her fawn silk and give her mind to the household arrangements. Sir John and Lady Sedhurst, though overjoyed by their son's marriage, were a little inclined to think that a "rustic wedding" was hardly commensurate with the dignity of his position in the county, but Emily's explanations were so cogent and her personality so winning that they allowed themselves to be swept along in her triumphal progress. There were no carriages, save those in which the Sedhurst party and their friends arrived, and the wedding breakfast was spread in the Rectory garden. Emily had even the strength of mind to refuse Mrs Berringer's self-sacrificing offer of the services of her professed cook as caterer in chief. What she said was that she could not disappoint Rebecca and Jerusha

of the opportunity of showing off their humble efforts, but inwardly she was quite determined that the nakedness of the land at the Rectory should not be exposed to supercilious eyes from the Hall. The parish rose nobly to the occasion. Every farmer's wife who was famous for a traditional cake or jelly contributed a specimen of her art, fruit and flowers poured in from cottage gardens, and eggs and cream were presented in almost embarrassing quantities. The givers must all have their gifts duly received by some member of the family, though they allowed Emily's natural preoccupation with her clothes to excuse her. Lettice was her obvious deputy, and was assured over and over again, with the very kindest intentions, that the good people did wish it was her wedding that was in question—but there! these things was settled elsewhere.

After all, the "rustic wedding" went off so well that Sir John vowed Emily had set the fashion for Sussex weddings in future, though none would ever come up to the original, for none could have such a lovely bride. The homely dainties of the wedding breakfast met with universal appreciation, and the speeches were so long and so cordial—in Sir John's case quite embarrassingly so to the ladies present—that Emily had to slip away at last with Lettice to change her dress before they were over. When the blue silk gown, the lace mantle, and the plumed bonnet were all satisfactorily adjusted, the bride suddenly took her sister by the shoulders.

"Lettice," she said, "what did Gilbert say to you the day we came down from London, when you were so long with Pompey in the Park, and Papa brought you back?"

"I never said Gilbert was there," equivocated Lettice unhappily.

"Well, wasn't he?"

"Yes, I—I saw him."

"And did he ask you to marry him? What did you say?"

"Of course I said it was impossible. What else could I——?"

"That was after you had heard about dear Ralph from Papa? I was afraid so."

Lettice's eyes expressed a dumb wonder that if Emily knew all about it, she had said nothing before. The bride answered the silent question with a touch of irritation.

"Now, Lettice, you know I never pretended to be good or self-sacrificing or anything of that sort. You couldn't have expected me to give up Ralph and settle down here for life, could you? So it was no good saying anything about it. But I am sorry—really, and if ever I can do anything to make up to you, you may count on me."

"Thank you, Emily; I am sure I can." Lettice tried hard to make her tone properly grateful, unaware of the precise form the promised compensation was eventually to take.

"You couldn't have expected me to do it, could you?" persisted Emily, her conscience evidently not quite easy.

"My dear Emily, believe me, I should never have been so foolish! Now, silly girl, don't cry and spoil your bonnet-strings. I assure you I am far happier than if I had been marrying Gilbert to-day, and you staying here in my place. We are both doing right, I am sure—and one can't do more than that, can one?"

And she dried Emily's tears—they were genuine, but not excessive—with delicate touches so that no one should see she had been crying, and led her down to where Ralph, magnificent in a blue coat and tightly strapped white trousers, was waiting at the foot of the stairs. His neckcloth was starched to a painful degree, his hair and whiskers were as glossy as his curly-brimmed, broad-topped hat. He had spared no pains to make himself a fitting escort for his beautiful bride, and as he led her out they were greeted with rapturous shouts. His carriage, the postilions and the four horses gay with white and silver favours, was waiting at the gate, and they drove off in a shower of rice and old shoes, leaving the guests to assure one another how

well everything had gone off. One by one the great people's carriages carried them off in their turn. Mr Tourneur retired to his study, Aunt Sophy was persuaded to go and lie down, and Lettice was left to put things in order again. The remains of the feast were to be distributed among the villagers, and Rebecca, Jerusha, and their numerous volunteer helpers all demanded directions at once. The most abstruse questions arose in the course of weighing the claims of a larger family against a smaller plate of particularly rich cake, and all these problems must be decided by Lettice. Not until she had seen the distribution actually accomplished, and had herself put away, or packed up for restoration to the lenders, the silver and the best tablecloths used for the breakfast, was she at liberty to climb the stairs wearily to her own room, and cover her ears from the cheerful hum of conversation over the business of removing the chairs and table from the lawn. For there was bad news respecting Gilbert.

There had never been any hope of Theodosia's attending the wedding, as her baby was only a week old, and the bridal pair were to conclude their honeymoon with a visit to her, but Charles had been coming, and had only that very morning sent a mounted messenger to say that instead he was obliged to go to London on business of Gilbert's. The seriousness of the business Lettice had gathered from the conversation of two or three of the guests, for evidently it was already in the papers. Her ears were quick to catch Gilbert's name even at what seemed impossible distances, and she learned that the discontent with his methods to which Mr Tourneur had alluded in the Park was now reaching very serious proportions. Owing to some misconception as to his powers, it seemed, Tony Ridding, acting as Gilbert's agent, had assigned to the Company formed to develop the resources of Bandeir rights which Gilbert stoutly asserted belonged to neither of them to part with. The concession from the King of Jhalábor was to Gilbert himself personally, and in the nature of

a trust of which he could not divest himself—least of all in favour of an irresponsible body of shareholders. His contention was that he had parted with nothing but the right to carry on certain industrial enterprises—mining, planting, and the like—subject in all cases to his direction; they declared as stoutly that the object they had in view in taking up shares was the acquisition of proprietary rights in Bandeir, which they were willing in the first instance to govern through Sir Gilbert Berringer, but only so long as his views and theirs were in unison. The line of cleavage developed itself in the course of several rather lively meetings between the concessionaire and the shareholders, for while the latter were of opinion that the return hitherto obtained on their money was absurdly small considering the known wealth of the district, and wished for what would now be called a general speeding-up all round, he refused absolutely to consider the changes of men and methods this would require. The last meeting had ended with unpleasant remarks about false pretences, and since Gilbert had scornfully refused an offer to buy him out, there seemed to be no hope of keeping the Company's affairs out of the law-courts. Tony Ridding's position no one could quite understand. He persisted that he had in no way gone beyond Gilbert's instructions, and more than hinted that he was being badly used. There was a sullenness in his attitude that made it seem probable he was on the side of the complaining shareholders, and this again told against Gilbert. Charles had gone to London to offer his services as mediator, or at least to interview both parties, and see if it was impossible to find any common ground between them. Lettice thought to herself that it was just like Charles thus to fling himself into the breach, but that his self-sacrifice was unlikely to have much effect. In a matter of right or wrong—and such eminently was his administration of Bandeir—Gilbert would never surrender an inch of ground.

It happened as she expected. Gilbert refused to recede from his position, which was confirmed by his

written instructions when these were extorted from Tony, though Tony declared that they had been amplified and extended by verbal directions given before he left Bandeir. The shareholders alleged that they had been cheated, and an action was begun. Gilbert left England suddenly while it was proceeding, waiting only till his own evidence and cross-examination were over, for the last mail from Singapore had brought news of disturbances in what would now be called the hinterland of Bandeir. The Jhalábor Malays, encouraged by the peacefulness of the tribes under white rule, were emboldened to encroach on their territories, and Peter feared that the old bad state of affairs would soon be in full swing again unless the ruler returned with reinforcements. It is not to be supposed that the British public as a whole took the view of the discontented shareholders, or even that these represented a majority in the Company. Opinion was much divided, and Gilbert had still admirers sufficient to give him the send-off of a popular hero, and prophesy him a triumphant future. He had succeeded in getting together about a dozen men of the stamp he wanted,—Lettice smiled, not without a suspicion of tears, when she read that each of them had been approved by four or five distinguished men of colonial experience whom he had asked to assist him. Could it be that Gilbert was learning to distrust his own insight into character at last? was he even convinced against his will by the conduct of Tony Ridding? These men had to give their final proof of fitness for service by being ready to leave England, almost without notice, months before they had expected to do so, and they stood the test. But Edward Donnellan, who had a family to move, could not expatriate himself quite so suddenly, and it was arranged that he and Agnes, their babies and a faithful nurse, should follow by another ship. An outbreak of measles in Sniddingly village prevented Agnes from spending her last days in England at her old home, and the Squire decided that he and Mrs Berringer would take rooms at Southampton with the

travellers and see them off. As soon as this was settled, Agnes wrote to beg that Lettice would spend the last week in the London vicarage with her, and to no one's surprise more than her own, Lettice, the untravelled, left home for the second time in twelve months. Everything seemed to conspire to make it desirable for her to go. She had finished copying out *Marmaduke Garnier*, and was glad to have the opportunity of placing it herself in the hands of Messrs Gantley & Lehigh, and learning their opinion on it. Moreover, Mr Akehurst was going to town to attend the sale consequent upon the dispersal of a famous library, and Mrs Akehurst was going with him for a week's shopping. They would be putting up at the coffee-house in the City which Mr Tourneur himself patronised on his rare visits to London, and Lettice could stay there under their wing, and pass all the days in Agnes's dismantled home.

She saw little of Edward Donnellan during her visits, for the shareholders' action against Gilbert was still dragging its slow length along, and he spent most of his time in court. She and Agnes passed the family possessions in review, and decided which things were to go to Bandeir, which to be stored in the roomy attics at the Hall, and which to be given away. Then came the packing, varied by the reception of sorrowing parishioners, generally bringing gifts—most of which were of a nature impossible to convey to the tropics, and useless had they been taken there. But at last everything was packed save what would be wanted on the voyage—which in those days included furniture for the cabin—and on the Donnellans' last evening in the house Agnes and Lettice, weary but triumphant, ceased from their labours and allowed themselves a brief rest in the dusk in the deserted nursery. The children were gone to bed, from the downstairs rooms were audible the voices of the workmen who would presently be coming up, armed with stencil-plates and lampblack, to paint huge names and addresses on the packing-cases, but in the meantime Lettice and her friend

used the packing-cases for seats. The house was old and roomy, and the barred bow-window of the nursery looked over a large brewery yard, which afforded the children perpetual interest in the rolling of barrels and the movements of elephantine horses of gratifying plumpness, reputed in nursery lore to be nourished on "grains." The open space allowed a view of a larger section of South London sky than was common in the neighbourhood, and every one said that the smell of the grains was extraordinarily healthy. By this time the vans had come in for the night, the horses had tramped off to their stables without the display of skittishness which marked their appearance in the morning, and the constant scrape of iron hoofs on slippery stones—the sound which to the end of her life would bring back to Lettice the old house by the brewery—was absent for awhile. High up in the building itself a solitary light cast the shadows of the bars into strange places on the nursery walls and ceiling, and Agnes and Lettice talked in hushed voices, as though someone lay dead in the house.

"And you really don't mind going, Aggie? I think that is the most wonderful thing," said Lettice.

"Why should I mind?" asked Agnes. "I have my dear Edward and my babes, and while I have them, I could be happy even in Boothia Felix." Few people nowadays could say offhand where this spot was, but Sir James Ross's discovery of the Magnetic Pole was fairly recent in 1851. "Of course," she added hastily, "there will be the inevitable parting as the children grow older, but you would not have me meet trouble halfway?"

"But the disturbance of all your habits," urged Lettice—"the alteration in the way of doing everything, the strange climate and language and customs——"

Agnes laughed. "Nay, Lettice, is it you who are holding out these as objections? I thought they had always served as powerful attractions to you?"

"They used to," Lettice admitted. "But one

changes so, Aggie. At one time it seemed as though nothing could ever make up to me for missing the strange countries and the new life I was thirsting for. But now I have grown so old, so horridly *set*. Were Gilbert to summon me, and I free to join him, I should still rejoice to go, but the joy would be all on his account, and not for the things that once influenced me so strongly. And I fear—oh, Agnes, I am afraid—that as the years go on I shall grow positively reluctant to face new conditions.”

“But this is morbid, my dear Lettice,” said Agnes in surprise. “Why should you change thus?”

“I will tell you.” Her voice, emboldened by the darkness, came clearly out of the shadows. “Don’t think me dreadfully irreverent, Aggie. When I was young I was like Saint Peter, anxious to go where I liked and do what I liked. Well, you know what Our Lord said to Peter, that one day he would have to go where he did not like, and do what other people wished? That is like me now. But suppose when Peter had become quite accustomed to do what he was told, and contented to do it, he was suddenly put back where he was before—told to choose for himself and plunge into all kinds of new experiences. Do you think he would like it?”

“My dear Lettice!” Agnes’s tone told that she was much shocked. Then she made a valiant effort to enter into her friend’s state of mind. “I see what you mean. He might be—just at first—at a loss.”

“At a loss! he would be *lost*!” retorted Lettice swiftly. “He would be what I am—a coward.”

“Nay, dear Lettice, there indeed you wrong yourself. When I think of your home, and what you are, I count you one of the bravest people I know.”

“Brave to bear, Aggie—not brave to do. It makes all the difference. I am a coward when Papa looks coldly at me and calls me ‘Laetitia,’ a coward when your mother speaks to me suddenly in the presence of others, and—oh, such a terrible coward in fear of the future! I told Emily last spring that I knew our

visit to Brighton would bring about changes, and see how they have followed—her marriage, a fresh difference with Gilbert, losing you. Any change must be terrible, and I am afraid—afraid!”

“Indeed, dear, I would not seem to be unkind, but surely you exaggerate your power of choice. Happily for us, a female’s path is usually marked out clearly by the line of duty.”

“Yes, I know. Mr Donnellan feels it his duty to go out and start a Mission in Bandeir, and your duty, without any question, is simply to go where he goes.”

“Precisely,” said Agnes, not without a gentle pride. “I have my natural feelings, Lettice. I may even confess—since I know you won’t betray me—to an occasional shrinking from the prospect. But I strive to quell the momentary rebellion, and I assure you it very soon disappears.”

“And Mr Donnellan has no conception that it ever existed!” said Lettice lightly. “Oh, Aggie, I wish I were like you, sometimes! No questionings, no reasonings, no harassing speculations—the straight path of duty and the will to follow it! But I am not like you. I must ask myself perpetually what I feel, and why I feel it, and what I should feel in certain other circumstances, and what other people must have felt before they acted thus, and what they are feeling now when they pretend to be feeling something quite different, and——”

“No, mercy!” cried Agnes, putting her hands to her ears. “My dear girl, is that indeed how you feel? Then I am truly thankful I ain’t like you, for I should be in a madhouse in a week. Pray what does it signify what we feel, when our duty lies clear before us? Our sole preoccupation must surely be to do it.”

“Quite so,” said Lettice drily; “no matter what our feelings be, they must be hid. Aggie, I trust Mr Donnellan realises what a pattern wife he possesses. Yet how can that be if all you feel is dutifully concealed from him?”

“What! all in the dark?” cried Mr Donnellan,

throwing open the door. "My dear, I have been seeking you all over the house. Pray come to some room where a chair and a table are left us, and let us pass our last evening in some approach to comfort."

"Oh, Mr Donnellan, is the case ended?" cried Lettice.

"Nay, not yet, but it is expected to end to-morrow. All will go well, I trust. There can be no doubt in the mind of any fair-minded man that the blame rests with Ridding, not with our unfortunate Gilbert."

"Why unfortunate, love?" asked Agnes. "Surely the dear fellow's troubles are at an end if the case is decided in his favour?"

"Not if he be left with a band of discontented associates, still further irritated by defeat, on his hands, my love. In fact, he left a strong injunction with Charles, should things go well, to buy back their shares at the price they paid for them, that the Company might be reconstructed on a sounder basis."

"But was not that very wise, love?"

"Very wise, my dear, if the money were forthcoming, but Gilbert's own resources are hopelessly inadequate. Charles feels bound to do what he can, for a reason he imparted to me to-day for the first time. He attributes Ridding's equivocal conduct largely to an act of carelessness on his own part."

"Poor Charles need not feel guilty," said Lettice sharply. "Tony could not be other than disingenuous if he tried."

"Yet Charles is to blame," said Mr Donnellan, "for listen. When Ridding returned from Bandeir to float the Company, he applied to Charles to let him see the letters he had received from Gilbert at various times, that he might be sure what his wishes were. Forgetting that some of these letters commented very severely on Ridding's conduct in certain circumstances, and spoke of him in strong terms, Charles complied, with the result that Ridding appears to have taken advantage of his position to foment as much

dissension as possible between Gilbert and the shareholders. He dropped the mask and confessed as much when Gilbert taxed him with his treachery before the case began."

"Indeed, Charles is only right in repaying Gilbert his losses," said Agnes. Her husband laughed.

"Nay, my dear, hardly that. Charles's resources ain't unlimited either. But he will do what he can, we may be sure."

"And what he is allowed!" thought Lettice. She could almost hear Theodosia saying, "You know, dear Charles, how reluctant I am to curb in any way your generous instincts. But when it is a question of relieving Gilbert from financial embarrassment at your own expense, it becomes incumbent upon me to remind you that your first duty is to your wife and children." Admirable Theodosia! how clearly would she make her husband see his duty in the matter, just as Mrs Berringer would instruct the Squire! Certainly Gilbert need not look to them for relief. But was there no one else who could help? What about Lettice herself? Her heart seemed to rise into her throat with a great leap, as she remembered a letter she had received that morning, redirected at her publishers' office, and had not yet answered.

CHAPTER XX.

THE VALOUR OF COWARDICE.

THE next day was one filled with mingled emotions for Lettice. The Donnellans left for Southampton, but the grief of parting was lightened by the fact that the lawsuit had ended in Gilbert's favour, so that his sister would be able to take him the good news. Then in the afternoon Lettice had an appointment with Mr Gantley, which would have been an alarming prospect in any case, but was now positively terrifying. She had a miserable feeling that she was contemplating treachery, and it made her decline a warm invitation from Mrs Gantley to spend the evening with them and go to the play. At the interview she was to hear the fate of *Marmaduke Garnier*, which she was utterly unable to forecast. To herself the book seemed superior to *Highpark*. She had felt surer of herself in writing it, had ventured to depend more on the working-out of character and less on external accompaniments of plot, and yet the story, as a story, satisfied her better. But she was quite aware that her critic on the hearth, Aunt Sophy, was disappointed, hard though she tried not to show it. Lettice knew because, when the reading of *Marmaduke Garnier* was finished, and the old lady had said, "Very pretty indeed, my dear—most elevating, in fact!" she hobbled off for her own particular copy of *Highpark*, and was soon weeping happily over Vavasour's return to his ancestral abode. Emily had said only, "Dear me! what droll things you do think about, Lettice!" and

Mrs Akehurst had looked at her curiously, and said, "Very clever, my dear Miss Lettice—very clever indeed. I only hope it may not be too clever for the public." Thus the consensus of opinion was not particularly hopeful, which was unfortunate, since Lettice was feverishly anxious that the book should impress Mr Gantley—if not as the greatest work the nineteenth century had produced, yet at least as one that had plenty of money in it. Behold her then conducted into the publisher's sanctum, flushed, trembling, almost inarticulate, and Mr Gantley, with fiendish cruelty, making polite conversation on the events of the day before proceeding to business. At last, however, he seemed to think he had set her sufficiently at her ease—or perhaps feared she might collapse altogether if he kept her waiting much longer.

"And about our little matter in hand?" he observed, with a paternal smile. Our little matter!

"Ye-es, the book," murmured Lettice. He made a considerable parade of looking in various drawers and getting out two or three wrong manuscripts by mistake. At last, however, the well-known bulky package appeared, and he settled his spectacles firmly on his nose.

"Ah, yes—the book. Well now, my dear young lady, I must—er—congratulate you"—Lettice gasped—"on an advance—a very considerable advance—on your last work."

"I must not faint. I won't faint," Lettice was saying to herself, pinching her wrist savagely. Aloud a very meek voice said, "You—you think well of the book, sir?"

"Ah, well, now—that one would hardly venture to say. Think well of no book until it is dead—eh? But a performance of distinct promise, and in quite a different vein from the other. We shall not have to think of you as 'Single-book Turner,' if I may speak so of a lady—eh?"

"Then you will publish it?" Lettice had no idea

how crudely her direct questions broke into the flowery generalities of the publisher, but she was sufficiently desperate not to mind if she had. Mr Gantley smiled broadly.

"Er—well, shall I say I hope our connection may prove even more satisfactory to both parties than in the former case?" he asked. Lettice remarked to herself that his voice was fat. She was glad of it, for it seemed to provide some sort of excuse for the dreadful thing she was going to do.

"What are you——? What will you——? What—terms do you offer?" She got the words out at last.

Mr Gantley's eyebrows went up, very slightly, in a way that gave him a pained expression. Lettice knew that in that moment she had fallen in his estimation to a depth from which she might never rise. "Do you—er—feel any doubt as to our dealing—I will not say generously; the word is not for me to mention—as to our dealing fairly with you?" he asked, putting the tips of his fingers together, and regarding Lettice over them.

But Lettice was not to be caught. "If I felt such a doubt, I should hardly be here to-day," she said, with a coolness magnificent in a person who was shaking from head to foot. Her question remained to be answered.

"As to—er—remuneration," said Mr Gantley, pronouncing the word with distaste, "I fear I could not take upon myself to speak definitely. I must confer with Mr Lehigh before I can make an offer of terms."

"I should be glad to have some idea what you would be likely to offer," said Lettice. She spoke nervously, but Mr Gantley realised that she did not intend to leave the office until she had had an answer.

"Well," he said, fingering the papers on his desk, "some—er—advance is called for, you think—eh? Shall we say—mind, this is purely on my own responsibility; I bind myself to nothing till I have

seen Mr Lehigh—shall we say five hundred pounds down for all rights? Five—hund—dred—pounds!”

Lettice drew a deep breath. The frightful thing must be done, then! Oh, how she had hoped and prayed that it might not be necessary! But it was for Gilbert.

“I have a letter here,” she said, “from a firm whose name I need not mention, offering me two thousand five hundred pounds down for the same rights.”

Mr Gantley sat up in his chair. “You submitted this manuscript to another firm before bringing it to us?” he demanded. His voice was fat no longer.

“No, I have shown it to no one. ‘My next novel’ is what they ask for.”

“Ah!” said Mr Gantley, relieved. “My dear young lady”—his voice meant “my poor dear young lady”—“this is a very common trick, to which only the most disreputable tradesmen would stoop. Were you to part with your manuscript on the strength of such a promise, you would not receive five hundred pence.”

“If I mentioned the name of the firm, you would see you were mistaken,” said Lettice. “But pray be sure I shall not part with the manuscript till I have received the money.”

Mr Gantley’s expression was more than pained now; it was tortured. “Do I hear aright?” he enquired mournfully. “Is it possible you can be contemplating the acceptance of this—er—preposterous offer?”

“Why not?” enquired Lettice, with a flippancy she was far from feeling. “It is two thousand pounds better than the only other offer I have had.”

“Ah, my dear Miss Tourneur, money is not everything!”

“No, indeed, but it is a good deal, sometimes. Especially when you are in want of it—when you must have it.”

Mr Gantley regarded her with fresh interest. This

quiet daughter of a country clergyman—what could she be wanting money for? She seemed agitated; could any one be attempting to blackmail her? But the very idea was absurd. “Come, my dear young lady,” he said, in his most fatherly tone; “you can trust me. You are in need of money? That sort of thing can be arranged through suitable channels, without such desperate expedients as this, you know. Let us hear about it.”

“What desperate expedients are there?” asked Lettice. “I have something to sell, and I am offered two thousand five hundred pounds for it by a firm of the highest respectability. There is nothing desperate in accepting the offer.”

“Well, no. But it is not impossible that the firm might be desperate if you did accept it,” smiled Mr Gantley.

“Then they should not have made it,” said Lettice. “They must have thought the book was worth the money.”

“Pardon me. That is precisely what they could not have done, since you say they have not seen the book.”

“Then they must have thought any book of mine was worth the money.”

“Ah, my dear Miss Tourneur! I am sorry to dash your hopes, but that, if I may say so, is the merest moonshine. No book you could possibly write could be worth such a sum.”

“Then may I trouble you for a piece of paper to wrap up my manuscript in?”

“Now, now!” deprecated Mr Gantley, smoothing the air with an anguished hand. “This haste, this rashness——! Indeed I had thought better of you, Miss Tourneur. I have met with much unkindness at the hands of authors—I could tell you some deplorable tales—but a young lady like yourself, to whom Mrs Gantley has been privileged to extend her hospitality, who has been received in the bosom of our family as an honoured guest—ah!” it was clear that he only

restrained himself forcibly from the mention of serpents. "Come, tell me the reason for this extraordinary need of money, and we will arrange it somehow. You have a parent. Is he the cause—er—is he aware of it?"

Dearly would Mr Gantley at this moment have liked a talk with Mr Tourneur, his recollection of whom he could not by any means fit into the picture which had occurred to him of a father ruined by speculation and dependent on his daughter for succour, but Lettice shuddered at the very thought that this negotiation might come to his ears.

"This is my concern alone—not my father's," she replied, with a brusqueness that sprang from terror. "I am sorry, very sorry, to have to leave you, for you have been most kind throughout. But the need is urgent. Please give me——"

But Mr Gantley was in an attitude expressive of recollection leading to deep cogitation. "Excuse me—one moment——" he murmured, and his lips muttered of pounds, and sheets, and editions, while his eyes read invisible figures on the ceiling. "I think, Miss Tourneur, we might be able to offer you a thousand pounds. It is more than we could name to any one else, but since we had the pleasure of introducing you to the public——" Lettice shook her head. "Dear, dear, this is very sad!" He gazed round with a hunted look, as though in search of some valuable with which to rush to the pawnshop. "Well, in consideration of our personal friendship and the lamentable circumstances—I gather that they must be lamentable, from the way in which you speak of them——"

"I have not spoken of them at all," Lettice interjected. "Yes, sir?"

"Fifteen hundred pounds!"

"Two thousand pounds—not a penny less," said Lettice steadily. "And that does not include a cheap edition."

"It must," said Mr Gantley, glaring at her. "I

absolutely refuse to consider the suggestion unless it covers all rights of every kind. Even then—Good heavens! Mr Lehigh will think I have gone mad. Never, never have I——”

“Very well. Two thousand pounds for all rights of every description, in consideration of all your kindness to me,” said Lettice, rising. “Pray consult Mr Lehigh, and I will be here at the same time to-morrow. If you feel it would be wrong to take the risk, I shall understand. The last thing I could wish is that you should suffer——”

“Pray, ma’am, spare me these compliments!”

“I was afraid you wouldn’t understand!” Lettice looked at him sorrowfully, and then proceeded to harden his heart afresh. “And if you decide to pay me the two thousand pounds, will you please have it here, in sovereigns, in a bag or something that I can carry?”

“Good heavens!” said Mr Gantley again helplessly. “Do you intend throwing it into the Thames? You will be murdered in the streets. Really, my conscience forbids me——”

“I am very sorry,” faltered Lettice, “but please do as I say. I shall have a vehicle outside, and a companion. Really, it is nothing wrong or out of the way, Mr Gantley, and you know, you are not to take the book if you think you will lose by it.”

And somehow or other, she passed through the shop and out to the waiting cab, Mr Gantley far too much perturbed to escort her. Astonishment at what she had done filled her with a kind of blank horror, and she could not have suffered more acutely had she heard Mr Gantley say bitterly to Mr Lehigh, “A lover, of course! That’s the worst of these quiet young women—they are always so deep. But two thousand sovereigns—in a bag that she can carry——!” “If she had said three thousand, we should have had to do it sooner than let her go,” said Mr Lehigh grumpily. For he and Mr Gantley knew, what the other enterprising firm had shrewdly guessed, that in the unknown Bliss Turner

the house of Gantley & Lehigh had lit on such a gold-mine as is only found once or twice in a century.

The mental paralysis that had gripped Lettice began to pass off as she drove through the streets, her brain noting and registering by force of habit the characteristics of the people and places she passed. It would have been the same had she been going to execution, and the wonted exercise restored to her gradually the power of thought. She had to lay her plans for getting the money into Gilbert's possession, unknown to himself, for she was quite certain he would never knowingly receive it at her hands. Even if anything could have made him take money from her, the terms on which they had parted forbade it. It was he who was angry with her now—sore, resentful, outraged in his tenderest feelings. Since that morning in the Park, he had made no attempt to communicate with her before he sailed, and she knew from Mr Donnellan that he was applying his grandmother's legacy, which he had hoped to settle upon her, to buying out the defeated shareholders. A casual question, unsuspectingly answered, had given her the name of his bank, and she had quite determined that since either bank-notes or a cheque would be liable to be traced, the only way was to pay the money into his account in gold. Further than this she had not gone, though she felt little doubt of obtaining the money, since, should Messrs Gantley & Lehigh prove obdurate, Messrs Buffage & Twissell promised to pay it down "on receipt of the MS." But now came the important question, how was the money to be paid in? If she did it herself, the officials of the bank were sure to consider such an action remarkable in the case of a plainly dressed young lady, and through Charles the details of her appearance would reach Gilbert, who would promptly fling her two thousand pounds back in her face. The idea of employing Mr Akehurst was tempting, but the worthy man was too cautious and conscientious. It was morally certain that he would refuse to act for Lettice in such a matter without first referring it to Mr Tourneur, and this must be avoided

at all costs. Clearly whatever was to be done must be done by Mrs Akehurst and herself, if she could induce that good woman—and she thought she could, if the occasion was sufficiently interesting—to act unknown to her husband. And it must be done the next day, for then the book sale would end, and the following morning they would all be returning to Abbotsbridge.

To the conquest of Mrs Akehurst, then, Lettice applied herself as soon as she reached the private sitting-room, redolent of an odour compounded of soot, worm-eaten panelling and musty moreen, reserved upstairs for the party. Mr Akehurst was below in the public room with some of his cronies, fighting the battles of the day over again, and Mrs Akehurst was distinctly bored by solitude, and in a mood to lend an ear to any suggestion of desperate deeds. Time was precious, and without even waiting to take off her bonnet and shawl, Lettice tackled her at once.

“Dear Mrs Akehurst, will you do me a favour?”

“Now indeed, my dear Miss Lettice, I take it very unkind in you to doubt it.” Mrs Akehurst rose with alacrity. “As if you didn’t know it was always a pleasure to oblige you! You want a little turn in the fresh air?”

“No, it is nothing now. It is to-morrow. Mrs Akehurst, do you think you could pretend to be an old lady?”

“Why, what else am I?” The jolly laugh negatived the suggestion. “But if you are thinking of charades, Miss Lettice—and I’m sure it’s bound to be shockingly dull at the Rectory for you this winter without Mrs Sedhurst—why, have you forgot I used always to be the old lady when I lived with you, because you all said I did it so well? Was it regular weekly parties you thought of getting up?”

“Oh no, no! Dear Mrs Akehurst, what would Papa say? And there ain’t enough people near us——”

“I was wondering who you meant to ask. But there! I suppose it’s no good saying how proud and

pleased we should be to welcome you whenever we have a gathering of young folks. Your Papa would think it beneath you, I daresay, but I'm sure nowhere—not in the highest circles—would you find a more genteel set of young persons, nor less likely to take liberties. I declare I'll speak to him myself the next time he comes in——”

“Oh, Mrs Akehurst, do please listen!” cried Lettice distractedly, for at any moment Mr Akehurst might appear. “It is not charades—I don't want gaiety—Papa would be horrified. What I want you to do is to pretend to be an old lady to-morrow, and let me come with you to pay two thousand pounds into the bank for Sir Gilbert Berringer.”

“Two thousand pounds! But where am I to get it?” was Mrs Akehurst's very natural question.

“I have got it. At least, I shall have it then. It's what I am to be paid for *Marmaduke Garnier*. I want him to have it for Bandeir—without knowing that it comes from me, of course—to put everything straight.” For it must be confessed that in spite of her theoretical dealings with the riches which crowned the penitent and triumphant Vavasour at the close of his recorded adventures, and that other wealth which Marmaduke Garnier nobly renounced for conscience' sake, poor Lettice was still firmly of the opinion that two thousand pounds was such a colossal sum as might place on a firm basis the finances of any nation. Even to Mrs Akehurst it appeared respectably large.

“Two thousand pounds!” she repeated, with something of awe—“and all for one book! My dear Miss Lettice, I must congratulate you. But do you really think of——?”

“I have quite decided to pay it into Sir Gilbert's account, but I don't want him to know who it comes from. And I want you to help me because he would not mind so much taking it from a very old lady, and there is no one among the Berringers' friends that it could be.”

The explanation was involved, but Mrs Akehurst

grasped it. "I could do that, of course," she said, after a moment's consideration—"but, Miss Lettice, have you thought? It may be a long time before you write another book, and there will be no money whatever coming in."

"I have several pounds left—six, I think—of the hundred I had for *Highpark*," said Lettice. "And Mr Richer has written to say he would like a book of advice for ladies starting housekeeping—'The Youthful Bride' he wishes it called—and he will give me twenty pounds for it, but I will *not* write it in the form of a catechism. Even he must see it would be absurd in this case. So you see I shall manage quite comfortably—and think what it will be to know that a whole island has been saved for Britain and Christianity through my money!"

"And Sir Gilbert Berringer set free from worry!" suggested Mrs Akehurst archly. Lettice looked at her.

"Yes, of course, that as well. He used always to discuss his plans with me, you know; they are mine as much as his. And even if that is all over now, at least I will try and help him in the only way I can."

"My dear Miss Lettice, you may count upon me. But I do hope you will never regret this day's work. And as for mentioning it to Mr Akehurst—why, he would say I had lost my senses!"

Lettice accepted the possibility calmly, and they laid their plans. When the unsuspecting Mr Akehurst was safely immersed in a sea of Elzevirs and *incunabula* the next day, his wife was waiting in a cab at the door of Messrs Gantley & Lehigh, which Lettice had entered, strung up by sheer terror to an aspect of unwavering sternness. She had no idea of the ruthless impression she produced, and was only thankful that neither Mr Gantley nor Mr Lehigh made more than one attempt to induce her to change her mind. Her request for the money or the manuscript settled the matter, and Mr Gantley laid a contract on the table for her signature, while Mr Lehigh produced

reluctantly a weighty bag. The idea of telegraphing to Mr Tourneur, which would occur to a modern man of business in their predicament, had not suggested itself to them, for the telegraph was so far very little used, and would have been futile if it had, since there was no wire to Abbotsbridge. Moreover, such subterranean enquiries as they knew how to put in motion had revealed Messrs Buffage & Twissell as the would-be poachers on their preserves, and they realised that they had just tided over a great danger. Therefore, when Lettice said timidly that she begged the affair might be kept a profound secret, Mr Gantley's wounded spirit found vent in nothing more cutting than the assurance that the firm were not likely to make it public; he could assure her *they* were not particularly proud of it. Her craven spirit yearned, even in the moment of victory, to assure them of her sorrow for what she had done, and to beg for their forgiveness, but happily it occurred to her that they might consider this rather a mockery in the circumstances. Therefore she bade them a cold good-afternoon, and curtseyed with much restraint, while Mr Lehigh heaped coals of fire on her head by carrying the bag of gold to the cab for her, and depositing it safely among the straw on the floor. She did not realise that his object was to see who was with her, but the figure of a well-dressed lady, her face hidden by one of the fashionable black lace veils, told him little, and it was with some asperity that he remarked, as he helped Lettice in—

“I must venture to say, ma'am, that if the feelings of the gentleman in whom you are interested were consulted, he would undoubtedly prefer to have his little difficulty settled through his legal advisers in the ordinary way.”

The gentleman in whom she was interested! The hint sounded so alarming to Lettice that she forgot even to blush. Not until they had reached the new Royal Exchange, whither, at her request, Mr Lehigh had told the cabman to drive, did it dawn upon her

that he believed the object of her interest to be incarcerated in the Fleet or the Marshalsea for debt, and credited her with the ambition of appearing, a veritable goddess from a machine, with a bag of gold for his release! She and Mrs Akehurst laughed low but irrepressibly over the idea when the cabman had been bidden to drive in the direction of the bank, and while Mrs Akehurst made certain changes in her personal appearance. She had altered the trimmings of her bonnet the night before, and now she reversed her mantle, turning its fringe and frills inside and showing the plain satin lining. Then she took out a huge white handkerchief, such as old-fashioned elderly ladies still wore, doubled it and spread it over her shoulders, and Lettice pinned it into place. Should sharp eyes detect dark hair in the bunches of ringlets behind the lace veil it did not signify, since no self-respecting old lady—unless she were very, very “serious”—would show herself anywhere without a front of false curls. Thus, when the cab stopped at the door of the bank, and an old lady, bent and leaning on an ebony cane, was helped out and tottered in, no one dreamed that she was anything but what she seemed. Explaining that she had not a footman with her to-day, she begged that someone might fetch a package which was too heavy for her mai—the young person with her—to carry, and one of the partners himself bustled out, with a clerk in attendance, to receive the bag of gold from the plainly dressed young woman in the cab. The old lady directed that the money should be paid into Sir Gilbert Berringer’s account, and refused to give her name, but under pressure consented to be put down as “A Friend.” Then she returned to her cab, and drove away—to St Paul’s Cathedral, for the gentleman who escorted her was asked to give the address to the driver.

Messrs Gantley & Lehigh were truly honourable men, for though they may have glanced at one another when the piquant story went the round of the Press

that a venerable female of genteel appearance, accompanied by a youthful attendant, had arrived at the —— Bank on such a day, and lodged two thousand pounds in gold to the credit of Sir Gilbert Berringer, declining to give her name, they said nothing.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHANGES AND CHANCES.

As she had feared, there were changes in store for Lettice when she returned home, and the first of them concerned a person with whom she would never in her wildest dreams have associated the thought of change. Aunt Sophy had never really lost her rheumatism all the summer, and when winter brought out the usual dampness in the Rectory walls she became quite helpless—as had happened the previous year. But not even the crippling of her active fingers could depress her cheerful spirit, and she resigned herself without a murmur to staying upstairs till spring came round, telling all her friends how much she had to be thankful for. Mr Tourneur was so good as to come up and read the paper to her now she could not get down to the parlour, and dear Lettice was constantly in and out. She was warm and comfortable, and now she had left off trying to move about, she really did not suffer very much.

But the state of things which seemed so pleasant and satisfactory to Aunt Sophy bore a very different aspect when viewed through other eyes. The other eyes were those of Miss Housman, friend of Aunt Sophy's youth, and sister of the young naval lieutenant who fell at the Nile. It must have been the intromission of the regular weekly letter, continued for so many years, that disturbed Miss Housman's mind, for she declined to accept anything that even her god-daughter

Emily could write as a substitute, and suddenly made known her intention of visiting her dear suffering friend, to see if she was being properly treated. Miss Housman had visited the Rectory before, but her visits had been deftly engineered into the early summer, when the neighbourhood was at its most picturesque, and such country delicacies as strawberries, cream, eggs and lamb, sufficiently abundant and cheap to be fitted into the weekly budget. But now, when she arrived in state with her maid, travelling in her own carriage with post-horses, the prospect failed to please. The Downs looked bleak and forbidding, the Sussex mud was of a disagreeably chalky and adhesive nature, and the food, of necessity, was of the plainest. Miss Housman thought her suffering friend's surroundings squalid, and said so, and did not consider it any excuse that her bedroom was the only one with a chimney that did not smoke, or that the outlook over the stable-yard furnished Aunt Sophy with endless occupation and interest in seeing that Jerusha did not waste her time talking to the odd man. She drove off in state to call upon the doctor, and extracted from him a statement that Miss Tourneur would never be better while she remained in such a damp house in so low a situation, and armed with this she returned to beard her host in the sacred study itself. Mr Tourneur found himself confronted with a foeman worthy of his steel in the person of this grim old lady, whose nose and chin so nearly met that it was wonderful she contrived to get any food into her mouth, and who rapped angrily on the floor with a gold-headed cane to emphasise her words. His polished periods were useless against her flow of language, and he found himself actually talked down. He had sacrificed his dear aunt all these years by making her keep house for him in this dreadful place, when she had a friend who would willingly have given her a luxurious home and sisterly affection. But dearest Sophia was no longer to be treated as an unpaid housekeeper. Whether she liked it or not—Miss Housman did not quite say this, but

it expresses her meaning—she was going to be carried off to enjoy the rest and comfort that befitted the closing years of a long and laborious life, and Lettice might learn to look after her father and the house instead of writing tracts.

It is possible that Mr Tourneur did not even realise that Lettice had for years performed the duties which were supposed to have crushed the fragile form of Aunt Sophy, but at any rate he agreed fully with Miss Housman that it was high time she learned to be useful, and passed on the admonition to her in due course. Happily for Lettice, the injustice went almost unnoticed in the shock of losing Aunt Sophy, who protested vigorously against her abduction, and pledged herself over and over again to return as soon as she was a free agent. But Lettice knew her placid nature, with its enviable faculty of making itself at home and happy in any surroundings where its lot might be cast, and realised that though Aunt Sophy might scout the idea that her departure was permanent, before the winter was over she would be quite reconciled to making her home with dearest Arabella. There would be two arm-chairs by the fire, two comfortable cushiony seats in the carriage, two old ladies—one tall and thin, the other short and stout—proceeding solemnly to church in bath-chairs on wet Sundays, and walking thither, guarded by Miss Housman's footman, when it was fine. Aunt Sophy's interest in the Rectory and its inhabitants would be as great as ever, she would prattle of them by the hour to the indifferent Miss Housman, she would press for visits from her nephew and Lettice, and entertain them in a perfect frenzy of hospitality, but Sniddingly would know her no more.

It was a matter of incredible trouble and expense for Miss Housman to get her friend carried downstairs and safely bestowed in the carriage for the journey, but expense and other people's trouble were nothing to her when her plans were in question, and she waved farewell to the guilty Mr Tourneur and Lettice from the carriage window with the air of a stern and

triumphant avenger. They went back to the old life with Aunt Sophy left out, for though Mr Tourneur's sense of duty brought him into the parlour every hour or so at first to ask Lettice why she was not doing something different from what she was doing, its new zeal faded before long. Lettice had an idea that Rebecca addressed a few pointed words to him when he actually ventured into the kitchen in his anxiety to make sure that all was going on as it should, and that thereafter he was content to leave the house in the hands which had managed it for so long. There were the usual parish duties and the usual discussion of them, prolonged as of old by Lettice in her terror of any conversation on abstract themes with her father, and in the evening he still read the paper aloud, and Lettice did her best to listen. She even tried to offer suitable comments after he had laid down the paper one evening with a cold reference to "your dear aunt's appreciative remarks," but it was hopeless. She could never intervene in the right places, and what she said was never right.

Nevertheless, she could not be actually unhappy while she had her writing to occupy her mind, and could secure an hour or two a day for it. There was always the time when Mr Tourneur had retired to his study after prayers at night, and sometimes she could snatch an hour in the morning or afternoon. "The Youthful Bride" was making satisfactory progress, much assisted by Emily, who, whenever she drove over, had a fresh discovery to record in the realm either of husbands, parents-in-law, or servants. The worldly wisdom on these subjects which she placed at Lettice's disposal would have done credit to a much married matron of seventy, and she never ceased to congratulate herself on having made up her mind, when she married, never to be surprised at anything. Otherwise she might have been painfully astonished by the selfishness of men in the little things that really mattered. Take for instance Ralph, who was most kindly teaching her to ride, and was going to buy her

a five-hundred-guinea horse, yet would on no account abandon his vulgar habit of drinking ale at luncheon. Of course Emily knew that she was a very lucky girl and immensely to be envied, and nothing would have induced her to breathe a word against Ralph save to one who she knew would be secret as the grave, but she did think it was right Lettice should know that people who were not married had yet something to be thankful for. And Lettice accepted the information with becoming gratitude. Perhaps she may have thought the pride and happiness visible in Ralph's face when he tucked the rug round his pretty wife with solicitous care, and took his seat beside her for the homeward drive the most fortunate man in Sussex, compensated for a little obstinacy in daily life—perhaps not. She had no right to give an opinion, and none was asked. Her part was to do with her whole heart what she had to do, and as she had said long ago to Agnes, try to shut out altogether the thought of the future, or the present that might have been.

In this she was helped by the fact that Agnes's letters, when they began to be dated from Bandeir, said little of Gilbert. There was much about the place and the people, and the curious experiences inseparable from house-building and home-making in a tropical island, but her brother's existence was rather taken for granted than emphasised. Lettice knew why. Gilbert had not forgiven her, did not intend to forgive her, and since the truthful Agnes could say nothing about him that was likely to be agreeable, she preferred not to say anything at all. Like the immortal Scottish minister, Lettice looked the question in the face, and passed on—to the best of her ability—to another matter, for a third novel was beginning to take shape in her mind, and afforded a welcome refuge when the sense of loss beset her too insistently. With the spring came the publication of *Marmaduke Garnier*, and though the reviews were no kinder than before, their increased length and complexity were an eloquent testimony to the book's

importance. Since she had now no financial interest in it, it might have been supposed that its success or failure would not very deeply affect her, but the mind's affection for its offspring is not to be measured by money. When the letters of Messrs Gantley & Lehigh began to lose their restrained tone, as of injury basely inflicted and nobly borne, and to mellow by degrees into something of the cordial strain of earlier years, she rejoiced as much as if the success to which the change bore witness meant untold pounds in her pocket. When they wrote a flattering letter enquiring as to the prospect of another work from her pen, and hinting delicately at liberal financial arrangements, she went about in joy and triumph for several days. And then came Charles, posting down from London on a hurried visit to the Hall, and turned the joy to blackness. There was more bad news about Bandeir.

Charles himself did not seem very clear about it when Lettice catechised him. He thought the affair must have begun with the publication of Captain Blanchard's book soon after Christmas. It was a racy, vigorous yarn, full of the joy of life and battle, and exhibiting battles in a good many places where the British public had no idea they had occurred. It played havoc, too, with various reputations of which the British public was tender, and erected on their ruins a whole new gallery of heroes, of whom the most prominent was Sir Gilbert Berringer of Bandeir. By far the larger part of the book was taken up with the narrative of the *Neæra's* visit to Jhalábor—from the injurious views of Gilbert held in Singapore which had occasioned the despatch of the vessel thither, to the triumphant rehabilitation which had followed the joint operations he and Captain Blanchard had conducted against the Reba pirates—and it comprised also an account from another pen of the subsequent expedition against the Taropans. The Wise King has remarked on the undesirability of possessing a friend who proclaims his friendship by loudly trumpeting

your virtues abroad, and the very vigour of Captain Blanchard's partisanship was calculated to provoke opposition. First one paper and then another commented sourly on the bloodthirsty character of the tale, and when their comments were construed as reflections on the Navy, explained with precision that they were aimed solely at Sir Gilbert Berringer. There was then, as there is now, a school of politicians that prided itself on disparaging impartially the makers of Empire all over the world—it was the same group, and largely the same men, that initiated the four years' persecution of Sir Robert Charteris two decades later—and a sinister activity began to show itself in this circle. Then Tony Ridding wrote a letter to the Colonial Secretary which was published in the papers, and the fat was in the fire. He could not, he said, allow the publication of Captain Blanchard's book to pass without dissociating himself from the things done in Bandeir to which exception had been justly taken. It was true that he had sustained a minor part in some of the earlier operations, but he had withdrawn, at considerable financial loss, from all connection with the active working of the state when he discovered their nature and extent. Moreover, he had reason to believe that it was not until after his departure that the gravest instance of aggression occurred, in the shocking cruelties which had attended the expedition against the Taropans. These people, who were by no means proved to have been pirates at all, had been practically extirpated by Sir Gilbert Berringer and his native allies, and their country brought under the sway of Bandeir.

"But how can any one believe such nonsense?" demanded Lettice hotly. "Why, the blacks all love Gilbert, just as he has always loved them."

"No one accuses him personally of cruelty, I believe," said Charles, "but all his force are Malays, of course, and the story is that they fight in the manner natural to them, while he shuts his eyes. The worst of it is that scoundrel Ridding brings in all manner

of garbled quotations from Gilbert's own letters to bolster himself up."

"But they must be forgeries if they support what he says."

"No, they are taken all right from those letters I was fool enough to let him have. He must have had 'em copied before we got them out of him. You know the sort of sporting, devil-may-care way Gilbert writes to his friends—anybody would think him a terrible fellow, not knowing that half of it's a joke and the rest put on. But there we are—with questions going to be asked in Parliament, and columns of letters in the *Times* every day."

"And of course there are all those shareholder people who dislike him already."

"I should rayther think they did! They are drinking it all in like water, and saying he ought to be impeached."

"Well, at any rate you can put the truth forward," said Lettice impatiently. Charles shook a wise head.

"Ah, my dear girl, you don't realise how much more attractive lies are! They have the start, for one thing, and not being limited by facts they can be as abusive as they like. We are nowhere compared with 'em."

"But they must be answered!" cried Lettice. "Charles, let me do it—write the letters to the *Times*, I mean."

"I doubt whether Theodosia would think it a task suited to a female pen," said Charles slowly.

"Who is to know that a female pen is concerned? You may sign the letters if you like; only let me write them."

"Well, I'll think about it. I daresay I shall see you next week, when we are at Abbotsbridge for the Assizes." Sir John Sedhurst was High Sheriff this year, and Charles and Theodosia were to stay with Ralph and Emily for the festivities accompanying the visit of the Judges. "Are you coming to the big dinner?"

"No, Abbotsbridge ain't within dining distance for

us. Poor old Whitefoot would hardly get us back in time for breakfast."

"Well, I hope this business of Gilbert's won't keep me in town. Theodosia will be uncommonly put out if it does."

"What an excellent husband you are, dear Charles!" said Lettice, with sudden irritation, and Charles wondered uneasily whether she was laughing at him as he went his way. He was destined to see her again sooner than he expected, for the day before the Assizes opened he drove over from Abbotsbridge in Ralph Sedhurst's gig, laden with urgent messages. Sir John's Vicar, whom he had naturally appointed his chaplain, was suddenly laid up with an attack of gout, and there was no one to preach the Assize sermon on the morrow. The neighbouring clergy all shirked the honour at such short notice, and it seemed as though Abbotsbridge would be eternally disgraced by the Judges proceeding to their duty unfortified by a sermon. Emily, with a precipitancy for which Theodosia mildly reproved her, flung her father's name into the breach, and triumphed aggressively when her recommendation was supported by the Duke of Duxford, who happened to be staying at his property on the other side of the town, and was dining at Abbotsbridge House. Poor Sir John, at his wits' end, jumped at the suggestion, and Charles, volunteering to act as ambassador, was despatched early with orders to kidnap his father-in-law and deliver him, with or without a sermon, in time to dine with Sir John and Lady Sedhurst that night. Mr Tourneur received the summons without flurry or elation. He was not in the habit of using his sermons twice, he said, but he had one that he thought would answer the purpose, with such alterations as he could plan in the course of the drive and make during the evening. No doubt Sir John would pardon deficiencies.

"Shall I pack your bag for you, Papa?" asked Lettice.

"I thank you, my dear, but if my things are where

they should be, I shall find no difficulty in doing it myself. Our good Charles will excuse me for a few minutes."

"Always makes me feel as if I were an urchin of twelve again!" lamented Charles when Mr Tourneur had withdrawn. Neither of his sons-in-law ever felt quite at ease in his presence, for his manners were so good as to make ordinary people uncomfortable.

"Never mind your feelings, Charles!" said Lettice, with a sad lack of sympathy. "What about Bandeir? Is the mail in yet?"

"Came in the day before yesterday. Believe me, my dear girl, we are in for it, and no mistake! Whether Ridding's attack was planned in concert with Gilbert's enemies in Singapore I don't know, but it has that appearance. What d'ye think of a petition to Parliament begging for an enquiry into the dealings of Sir Gilbert Berringer with the tribes alleged to be piratical?"

"But who signed it? Has he many enemies there?"

"Hundreds, by the look of it—well, dozens, anyhow. The worst of it is that they have got hold—or so they say—of a white man, an Englishman, who was living among the blacks at the time Gilbert harried 'em, and can bear witness to their innocence and general blamelessness. He is on his way home now, and they mean to use him for all they're worth."

"But who is behind all this? That man Sansom, I suppose?"

"I declare," said Charles admiringly, "for a woman, you have as neat a way of putting your finger on the spot as ever I saw! Yes, Sansom is in it, of course, and some dirty little rag called the *Eastern Tribune*, in which he is interested. But the whole affair is largely Gilbert's own fault. It seems that Sansom was appointed to some twopenny-halfpenny office in the Colony, and Gilbert must needs make it his business to write to the Governor and say the fellow had proved himself unfit to hold any position of trust. Naturally

he was sent off with a flea in his ear, and Sansom kept the job. The Governor is irate, and Sansom feels that he has been dared to do his worst, and means to do it."

"And what do people think here?"

"Why, the Secretary of State suspends his judgment pending further evidence, that's all. It means that they'll send out a Commission of enquiry if this man Barge seems a credible witness, no doubt. And meanwhile every penny-a-liner in London is busy having a fling at Gilbert."

"Let me answer them! Oh, Charles, you must."

"Nay, that's my business," said Charles resolutely. "But I've brought over what I've written," he extracted a bulky packet from the inside of his coat, "and I don't mind if you look through it. See that the grammar and spelling's all right—eh? That's more your line than writing letters to the *Times*, ain't it?"

Lettice put her hands behind her. "I won't look at it unless I may alter it where I think necessary," she said.

"Oho, Miss Lettice, you're a precious independent young lady all at once—eh? Well, I ain't particular. You do what you like to it, but the letter's mine, d'ye see? Now there's one place here, where Theodosia——"

"My dear Charles, you really must pardon my delay," said Mr Tourneur suavely as he entered. "Is it absolutely necessary, Lettice, that the house should have to be turned upside down to find me a clean pair of bands?"

"Oh, Papa, I put them away myself with your gown, ready for next Sunday!" cried Lettice, rising anxiously, but he stopped her.

"No matter, my dear. One was unearthed, after incredible exertion, by the domestics. It seems that I shall now be provided with two pair. Well, my dear fellow, if that handsome animal of Ralph's ain't to champ holes in the drive——" and Charles, red with embarrassment, was courteously compelled to precede

his father-in-law from the room. He cast an anxious glance at Lettice as he settled himself in the driving-seat of the gig, and she nodded at him confidently as she helped the groom to stow Mr Tourneur's carpet-bag behind. One glance at the papers covered with Charles's laborious script had shown her that if their contents ever attained the dignity of print, they would do Gilbert harm rather than good, from the boredom they would inflict on his friends. She would have liked to re-write the whole thing, but the mention of Theodosia had warned her to be cautious. Since Charles and Theodosia had collaborated in the long-winded, inconclusive document before her, it was prudent to treat their joint effort with tenderness. The result took her much longer than if she had written the letter herself, but at length, by dint of judicious pruning, severe repression of irrelevancies, and deletion of mere verbiage, the points in Gilbert's favour, which in the original were blurred and slurred over as though of *malice prepense*, were brought forward clearly, and something resembling an argument stood out from the mass of words. Lettice had longer than she expected for the work, since her father was away for three nights, and Charles received the papers from her with genuine gratitude when he drove him back. The comparative shortness of her letter as compared with his caused him considerable anxiety, however, and it took some time to assure him that nothing of moment had been left out. When he had driven off again, Lettice sought her father to ask how things had gone, for Charles had merely volunteered the opinion that the sermon was "first-chop—at least, so everybody said."

But Mr Tourneur did not seem inclined to talk, beyond mentioning that on the second evening he, with the rest of the Abbotsbridge House party, had dined at Duxford Park with the Duke. At supper he referred rather contemptuously to the conversation at Sir John Sedhurst's dinner, which seemed to have been pessimistic in character. Someone had spoken of the

lamentable tendency among the Bishops of the day to abjure wigs and appear in their own hair, and it had been generally agreed that when once the Bishops' wigs went, those of the Judges would soon follow, and then the downfall of England would be at hand. He described the speakers neatly and maliciously enough, but it seemed to Lettice that all the time he was flinging her conversational scraps from the banquet, his mind was dwelling on something else, of which he said nothing.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN ONE HOUR.

"I HAVE a piece of news to tell you, my dear." Mr Tourneur came into the parlour with a paper in his hand, and Lettice glanced up from the brief note in which Charles thanked her for "looking through" his letter, which had already produced a most gratifying revulsion of feeling in Gilbert's favour. It was evening, but the Squire, happening to ride into Abbotsbridge, had brought out from the post-office the letters for the Rectory as well as the Hall.

"This is a letter from the Prime Minister, couched in highly flattering terms, and offering me the Deanery of Mainspring—a most unexpected honour."

"Oh, Papa, how nice for you! You won't have to complain any more that the people don't appreciate your sermons."

"Some daughters would have thought that it was Mainspring which ought to be congratulated," remarked Mr Tourneur drily. "But let me beg of you"—as though he could see the words trembling on Lettice's lips—"not to say it now. There is nothing more distasteful than an enforced compliment."

"Sh—shall you accept it, Papa?"

"Accept it? Why not? As a person of average mental capacity, Lettice, you can hardly have imagined that I remained buried in Sniddingly by choice?"

"We have been here so long—I can hardly re-

member living anywhere else——” faltered Lettice, but he was not listening to her. He stood on the hearth-rug, or took quick steps backwards and forwards, and talked as though to himself.

“The very different sphere in which I was accustomed to move—the sphere I should inhabit now were it not for the callous neglect—— But no,” with decision, “I don’t regret it, I am not sorry that I yielded to Duxford’s solicitations when he said Meldreth was particularly desirous of seeing me. I had no reason to shrink—— And then to find——! This will entertain you, Lettice, no doubt. Pray why do you think my cousin Meldreth desired the Duke to make a point of my dining with him a month ago?”

“I don’t know, Papa, indeed.” Lettice had heard Lord Meldreth’s name mentioned as one of the party at Duxford Park, but her father had said nothing about the meeting.

“Nothing more or less than to demand of me—with some improper expressions, for which I reprov’d him—what I meant by holding him up to public contempt in a foolish novel.”

“Papa! not—*Highpark*?”

“Aye, my dear. We could neither of us recollect its name, and called it *Lowood*, if I remember aright, but that was the work indicated. Fortunately I was able to assure him that far from writing the book, I had not even read it, and he was good enough to accept my word.”

“But you didn’t tell him, Papa? Oh, I do hope not!”

“For what do you take me, Lettice? Or do you think that these productions of yours ought to be a source of pride to me? Let me beg you to believe they are nothing of the kind. I trust you ain’t intending to parade your novels when we change our abode? Nothing could be less agreeable to me than to have my daughter stigmatised as a blue.”

“Oh no, Papa! I shall never say a word. It

will be just as much a secret as it is now. I should be frightened to death——”

“Pray don’t think it necessary to exaggerate. It would be more to the purpose if you reflected that the proper performance of the duties of your new station will leave you little time for such trivial pursuits.”

“I will try not to give you reason to complain of me, Papa.” Lettice waived the question discreetly. “But do you think it was Lord Meldreth who influenced the Prime Minister to offer you this Deanery?”

“Most certainly not,” with extreme decision. “Meldreth has no political influence whatever—has had none for many years. The Duke may have had something to say to it. He appeared struck by the violence of Meldreth’s attack upon me, and anxious to atone.”

“Then he didn’t know you were related?”

“Of course he did. Why not? We were all members of the same set in the old days. He may even have hoped to reconcile us.”

“Then he knew what the quarrel was about?”

“There was no quarrel. I perceive, Lettice”—Mr Tourneur frowned darkly, and Lettice felt ready to sink into the ground—“that you are consumed with vulgar curiosity on the subject of my relations with Lord Meldreth. I should have thought better of you had you questioned me definitely on the matter, instead of endeavouring to extract information by indirect means, but I have decided to gratify you—”

“Oh, Papa, I am so sorry! I never meant—— Please don’t tell me anything you would rather not.”

“—To gratify you, because I do not choose that you should imagine a mystery where none exists. On quitting the University—with sufficient distinction—I conceived for my cousin Meldreth the romantic sort of attachment frequently inspired in a youth by a man a little older than himself. He

was possessed of striking charms of person, and his manners, when he so chose, were of the most ingratiating character. Perceiving my infatuation, he was flattered by it, or so I suppose, and was pleased to extend me his patronage. Extend, do I say? nay, he flung it at me, though I failed to see this. I entertained the most soaring ambitions at that time. Success at the Bar—in literature—in the legislature—I aspired to them all. What could be better calculated to facilitate my views than the offer made me by my relative of a position in his establishment, where my services as his secretary would at once relieve me of any feeling of obligation, and leave me ample time for my own studies? I accepted, and bound myself to slavery."

"He treated you unfairly? He demanded all your time?" asked Lettice, deeply interested.

"By no means. Lord Meldreth is the last person vulgarly to defraud another. But his mind, in those days, was of such a cast that he could not endure in any of his dependants a spirit that sought its pleasure—its employment, even—apart from him. His generosity was boundless, but its objects must consent to exist as its objects, and nothing more. He was prepared, I believe, to provide royally for my future, if I would permit him also to dictate it. But I had other aims than to become a mere satellite. Pray don't stare so foolishly, Lettice. This history has no special concern for you."

Lettice thought otherwise as she murmured confusedly that what concerned her Papa must surely— She had so long and so often been conscious of that very atmosphere surrounding herself, but it had never entered her mind, even in her wildest dreams, that her father could ever have been subjected to the same thing. If he knew what it was like, why did he—? But he was speaking again.

"At first, I confess, I perceived nothing of this. As Meldreth's relative, and as possessed of a certain assurance and quickness of speech, I was made

welcome by the circle that surrounded him. I catered for their entertainment and earned their applause, rewarded by the approving smile of my cousin, who vowed to me that my future should be his personal care. But while the future was assured, the present was wasted. I woke to the conviction that I was doing nothing, should do nothing, in the lines in which I had purposed to seek distinction. I saw myself in danger of sinking into that despicable character, the parasite of a man of rank, dependent upon his patron's favour for the very bread he ate. At any moment services might be demanded of me incompatible with the feelings of a man of honour, and I was fast depriving myself of the power of refusing them. With the utmost reluctance I approached my cousin on the subject, hinting that in my own interests I might be forced to quit his roof, that I might devote myself to the studies too long neglected. He met me with the utmost kindness, renewed his assurances of protection, but showed himself quite incapable of understanding me. I should be happy in no other line of life than that, he declared, and I believe he was sincere. There was in him a species of benevolent tyranny that made it impossible for him to allow any deviation—nay, what do I say?—any independence of his will. When I persisted he grew warm, and declared in an arrogant manner that wherever I went, he would call me to heel, and I should return as if I were one of his dogs—then slapped me on the back and cursed me for a stiff-necked, long-faced fellow, but swore he loved me nevertheless. I swallowed the affront, but found myself incapable of pardoning it. I could perceive only one avenue of escape, and having communicated with the Head of my old College and obtained introductions from him, I made my arrangements, which hinged upon Meldreth's absence at Newmarket. I excused myself from making one of his party, and when he had left London, quitted his roof, never to return."

"Oh, Papa, how brave of you!" cried Lettice involuntarily. "I could never have done it."

Mr Tourneur regarded his daughter with distinct distaste. "Then perhaps, my dear, it is just as well that you are never likely to be placed in a similar position," he remarked acidly, and Lettice realised that she had once more said the wrong thing. Her father spoke hurriedly.

"My five years with him had left me a beggar—worse than a beggar, for I had lost the power of application I once possessed. London was closed to me, for even could I have persuaded any reputable employer of the seriousness of my intentions, Meldreth would have made it a point of honour to draw me back into his circle, and no one would repose confidence in a young man of fashion with such acquaintances. Therefore I had made up my mind to take Orders, and I carried out my intention, starved for years as a curate, and starved again in a small living, before I was offered Sniddingly. It was not the life I should have chosen, but I have done my duty in it—yes, I am thankful to be able to say I have done my duty."

"And you heard nothing of Lord Meldreth till now?"

A dark flush came over Mr Tourneur's face. "I received a communication from him once, in your mother's lifetime. His life had long been a matter of notoriety, but he had the insolence to offer me the post of domestic chaplain—in a house which no respectable female could enter. I declined it, in a letter which I was glad to learn remains still in his memory. Now perhaps you perceive why the absurd rumour about your novel perturbed me when it appeared."

"But I could not help it, Papa! I had nothing to do——"

"My dear, I have received that assurance from you *ad nauseam*. Once for all, pray believe that I accept it, and let us turn our minds to the more profitable subject of the future. It will be necessary for me to

make a journey to London, and perhaps even as far as Mainspring. When I have viewed the residence allotted to the Dean, it will be your part to make arrangements for our occupation. As to the pecuniary provision for our removal thither, which may present some difficulty at first——”

He paused, and looked fixedly at her, and Lettice was conscious of a violent hammering in her head. Mechanically she stitched on, purely that she might not meet his eye. His tone changed.

“I should much like to know who it was that informed you your lower lip was the most admirable feature of your face, Laetitia. We see so much of it.”

The protrusion of the lower lip was an old trick wont to show itself when Lettice was plunged in deep thought. Its reappearance at this moment was decidedly unfortunate.

“Oh, Papa, I am so sorry. I was only thinking—— I ought to tell you that I have only a little money just now.”

“Yet you brought out, I believe, a second novel not long ago?”

“Yes, but I parted with the money. It was a—— a charity. Papa, if you insist upon it, I will tell you what it was, but I would much rather——oh, so much rather!——not.”

The test was a severe one, but Mr Tourneur surmounted it triumphantly. “Most certainly I shall ask for no information that you prefer to withhold, Laetitia. Of my views as to the heedless disposal of large sums of money by young women I need not speak, since you cannot pretend to be ignorant of them. It is sufficient that I need look for no assistance——of however temporary a nature—from you.”

“I have about fifteen pounds, Papa, if you would——”

“Nothing would induce me to dream of accepting it from you. That will do, Laetitia; the subject is closed.” The tears burning in her eyes and the words

on her lips must alike be arrested as she bent over her work. She expected to hear the door close behind her father as he retired to the study, when she would be able to give way, but it seemed as if this evening he could not endure the thought of solitude. In after days she was to reproach herself for not thinking more of this reversal of his usual habits, but in the turmoil of her spirit she could only listen helplessly while he talked of the little Western cathedral, a miracle of carving in buff-grey stone dropped between the hills and the wide-spreading flats, of the genteel society of the neighbourhood, and of the dearth of good preaching there during the last years of the late Dean, a nonagenarian and an absentee. She recovered herself sufficiently at last to be able to offer due response, but the unrest which was possessing him seemed to make it impossible for him to let her alone. He turned round upon her suddenly.

"I hope, Lettice, you have no intention of setting up for a character when we reach Mainspring? Nothing is more prejudicial to the position of an ecclesiastical dignitary than an affectation of singularity on the part of his household."

"Believe me, Papa, my only wish is to be precisely like everybody else." She tried to speak lightly.

"Pardon me, my dear, that is absurd. Theodosia and Emily are always neatly and suitably dressed, with no undue display, but you never look in the least like them."

"Shall I try to look like them, Papa?" She repressed the temptation to ask him what he thought Theodosia and Emily spent on their rich silks and their perfect ostrich-plumes. "I could ask Emily to show me how to do my hair in curls."

"By no means!" hurriedly and ungratefully. "How has poor Emily injured you that you should wish to caricature her?"

Lettice had brought the snub upon herself, but it was none the sweeter for that. She rose hastily and went to the corner cupboard to look for a non-existent

reel of cotton there, that she might dash her handkerchief fiercely against her brimming eyes. But the attempt at concealment was in vain.

"I fear, Lettice," said her father as she returned, "you fail to perceive that all I may have cause to say to you is inspired by affection, and directed solely to your good?"

The hard-won restraint gave way for one moment. "Oh, Papa, if I didn't believe that, how could I bear it all?" said Lettice.

He looked as though his ears must have deceived him. "Bear it? Bear what?" he demanded.

But the moment of revolt was passed. Lettice was no heroine. "Oh, everything—nothing in particular," she stammered.

"But I insist on hearing what it is. Come, you have brought an accusation against your parent. What does it mean? If you have any complaint to make, make it."

"I have none—I didn't mean—I can't think what made me say it," faltered Lettice through her tears.

"It is a poor return for a lifetime devoted to duty—duty to my parish, my neighbours, my household, to hear that I make my daughter's life intolerable. Speak, Laetitia, I command you. What have you to complain of?"

"Nothing—oh, everything!" cried Lettice, sobbing wildly.

"That is childish, Laetitia. There is no occasion for these hysterical outbursts. Point me to a single instance of duty left unfulfilled, and I shall be deeply grateful to you. My life in this place may not have been congenial to myself, but I had flattered myself it was at least beneficial to others."

"Indeed, Papa, I am sure you are most respected——"

"Yes; well, what more? Esteemed, you would say?"

"Oh yes, Papa—esteemed and admired by everybody."

"Well, go on. But not beloved, you would say? Understand, Laetitia, that I have never made it my aim to seek the suffrages of the vulgar. At the same time, I did not expect to hear such a judgment from my daughter's lips."

"Oh, Papa, I never said—I didn't mean—— You made me say it. I never thought of such a thing——"

"But now that you have put it into words, you accept it as true? I leave you to your own conscience, Laetitia."

And he lighted his candle from that on the table and went off to the study, while Lettice laid her head on her arms and sobbed till she could cry no more. She had always known herself a coward, but never had she felt anything like her present condition of mental and physical powerlessness. It was as though she had been beaten till she could not move. And how had it come about? She racked her memory to discover how the fateful pass had been reached. Why to-night, of all nights, after the long years during which her intense admiration of her father—he had stricken the adoring love of her childhood very early into dumbness—had contrived to exist side by side with a shrinking fear of him? Dimly she realised that his own mental excitement had rendered him unwontedly sensitive this evening, so that he was made aware of the underlying antagonism between their natures in which he would not otherwise have believed. The daughter who was his natural butt possessed a personality—more, a critical faculty—of her own, and had ventured to view him through that medium; so much he now knew.

"You had better go to bed, Laetitia." She had heard him walking about in the study, but now he opened the parlour door, and barked out the words as though he could not endure even to breathe the same air with her. He stood watching her coldly as she rose and put away her work and extinguished the candles, moving slowly and feebly like an old woman, then watched her upstairs with the same chill unfriendliness, and the study door closed again. When she crept

into bed she pulled the clothes over her head that she might sob in peace, for the servants slept just above her, and so at last cried herself to sleep, and dreamed that she was in church and her father was preaching. She woke with a start to realise that his voice was actually in her ears — “And though I satisfy every canon of behaviour, and perform every duty beyond cavil, but have not charity — love — it profiteth me nothing — profiteth me nothing!” she could hear his hand brought down on something hard. “Dear me! I never knew that text before,” she thought, still half-asleep, and lay down again as she heard his door close.

“Master was preaching beautiful in the passage last night, all to hisself,” volunteered Jerusha in the morning, with a sort of propitiatory giggle. “He waked us, he did, the way he thumped the banisters for the pulpit cushion, dreadful hard. And now I can’t make him hear, miss.”

“Leave him for half an hour. He was very tired. Perhaps he was going over his sermon for Sunday,” said Lettice nervously. Breakfast would be late, but anything to postpone the moment of meeting him again face to face!

At the end of the half-hour Jerusha reappeared with an embarrassed grin. “I couldn’t make Master hear for ever such a long time, miss, and he do answer so funny.”

“I will come,” said Lettice, putting on a cloak, and she knocked at her father’s door and went in. He regarded her with hostile eyes, but did not speak. Was it her fancy, or did his face look twisted?

“I am afraid you are not very well, Papa. Shall I send for the doctor?”

He spoke with a distinct effort, and his face looked as usual. “Doctor? nonsense! I am perfectly well. What is that girl doing, peeping in at the door?” Prompt disappearance of Jerusha.

“Wouldn’t you like a composing draught, Papa? I could bring it you in a moment.”

“Composing draught? Faugh! What folly is this?”

I verily believe, Lettice, that you think I am elated by the news that arrived last night! Pray allow me to get up in peace."

Lettice retired perforce, but in less than a quarter of an hour the sound of a heavy fall recalled her, and brought the servants rushing upstairs. Mr Tourneur had fallen down while shaving, and was quite insensible. The help of the odd man had to be sought before the three women could get him into bed, and the doctor, when summoned, had no uncertain message to give. The Rector must have had a stroke in the night, and a second while dressing. He would probably recover some measure of consciousness, but it was unlikely that he would be able to speak. A third stroke would be fatal, but might not occur for years.

Hours of fierce bustle succeeded—the prelude to the most utter stillness Lettice had ever known. The Squire came, kind and fatherly as ever, taking on himself the burden of the curate's salary, offering whatever the Hall could provide in the way of nursing and invalid diet. The villagers crept to the back door for lengthy colloquies with the servants, or stood watching the front of the house as though they expected to see some change in it. The news must be written to Theodosia, to Emily, to Aunt Sophy, and one and all discouraged, by the doctor's advice, from coming to the Rectory just at present. The Prime Minister's letter must be answered, and his offer declined. Lettice, who knew nothing of her father's income or business matters, must grapple with the necessity of discovering what money she had to depend upon, and where it was to be found. In those days before Florence Nightingale, it was also the obvious thing that all the nursing should fall to Rebecca and herself, with occasional help from the village in the night work, and she was almost worn out. Gradually things settled down. The Squire and Charles came to help her go through the drawers in the study, and they found Mr Tourneur's bank-book, which contained entries amply confirming his rumoured literary activities. They found also a notebook with

particulars of the various articles he had contributed to different periodicals, and of the sums received for them. To Lettice there was something horrible in thus laying bare what he had kept so carefully concealed, but she had to do worse even than that. In his desk was a half-finished article, with full notes for its completion, and she took deliberate possession of it and finished it on the lines indicated, sending it with a note of explanation to the editor for whom it was designed. It was a dreadful thing to do, but it was necessary. The income of the living would not maintain the household and pay the expenses of illness, and though Charles and his father might enjoin upon her to appeal to them should she find herself in any difficulty, she resented fiercely the idea of begging. The editor received the article with suitable expressions of condolence, and asked if it would be possible for Miss Tourneur to complete two others which his esteemed contributor had had in hand. Lettice found the rough drafts, with their references to the authorities to be consulted, and set herself to expand the notes and clothe the skeleton.

By this time Mr Tourneur had regained such consciousness as could be hoped for. He knew who approached him, but he could not speak to them, nor make any sign to show that he understood what was said. For the Squire, the curate, for Theodosia and Emily and their husbands, his eyes would soften, for Lettice they remained persistently unfriendly. For months her life was lived in the presence of that awful motionless figure with the hostile eyes, ministering to him day and night, or working at the articles and her own writing. From the first she realised that she must put away from her rigidly the thought that she might possibly be to blame for his seizure. She had fought the matter out with herself, and she could not conscientiously decide that the fault was hers. It was only too easy to think that it was, but her present duty was clear, and if she was both to watch over him and to earn money for his support, such torturing imagina-

tions must be kept at arm's length. Even without them the strain was sufficiently severe.

Emily came fluttering in one day, all muslin and lace and blue ribbons and floating ringlets. She had driven over in the pony-chaise with two white ponies which was Ralph's latest present, and she found her world very good. The contrast between it and the close sick-room, with Lettice writing busily in her corner, naturally raised in her the impulse to blame somebody—Lettice, for preference—and when she had sat by her father a little, smiling and talking without meeting any response, she demanded that her sister should relinquish her post to Jerusha, and give her tea on the lawn. Lettice gathered together obediently the sheets of *Lillah*—her third book was well on its way—and followed her down.

"I don't believe you ought to write upstairs. I'm sure it worries poor Papa," said Emily when she was seated.

"If I sew, it worries him to see my hands moving. If I read, it worries him to see the pages turned over," said Lettice succinctly. "I must do something."

"I don't see why. I just sit by him and talk cheerfully, and I'm sure he's quite interested."

"My dear Emily, you see him once a week, and you come from a distance and have plenty to talk about. I can't spin out Sniddingly affairs indefinitely."

"You ought to go about more, and pick up interesting things to tell him," complained Emily. "I declare that room is enough to give anybody the blues, as dear Ralph says."

"Well, I live in it," said Lettice shortly. Emily looked at her more closely, with an expression by no means flattering.

"I suppose you know you have gone off frightfully, Lettice? Sallow ain't the word, and lines! and your hair is actually turning grey! What is the good of shutting yourself up like this? It can't be very cheerful for poor dear Papa."

"I do my best," said Lettice, unmoved. It seemed sometimes as if nothing could move her since that dreadful evening. "My duty at present is to Papa. I must do my writing as well, for the sake of the money, and perhaps—I don't know—it keeps me from—helps me to go on. Then you come in and cheer him and interest him. It's quite true that he doesn't care about what I say to him."

"It's all nonsense about the money," said Emily pettishly. "Ralph would have sent a ten-pound note to-day if I had let him. But when you have married without anything of your own, you are thankful enough, goodness knows, when you can tell him your family can manage without that sort of help." A slight inconsistency seemed to strike her here, and she changed the subject suddenly. "At all events you're sure of Gilbert, that's one good thing."

"Gilbert is not bound to me in any way!" said Lettice hotly.

"Oh, that's absurd, after all these years! Don't be afraid, my dear. The rest of us will see that Gilbert does his duty, I promise you."

"Gilbert will do his duty, indeed, but he has none to me. I wonder at you, Emily, when you know that he is in all this trouble again. Why," desperately, "I should hardly have thought you would even care for the connection."

"I shouldn't," confessed Emily frankly. "But if Gilbert turned to you in his troubles—eh, Lettice?—do you tell me you would not be pleased?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

NOT PROVEN.

THE troubles to which Lettice had referred were indeed closing darkly round Gilbert. His first actions on his return from England had necessarily brought him into violent collision with the court of Jhalábor, for he evicted the intruding Malays from Bandeir territory with little ceremony, confiscating and restoring to the tribesmen the wealth they had succeeded in extorting. He followed up this blow with an intimation to the King that any further attempt on the part of his courtiers to exploit Bandeir would result in a diminution of the tribute in proportion to their ravages—a rending of the decent veil of etiquette which caused acute discomfort to the Jhalábor mind. The King returned a meek message to the effect that the raids had been entirely unauthorised by him, and he only wished Datu Brinja had cut off the heads of the perpetrators, but private accounts received by Yusuf of his actual remarks on the subject did not bear out the impression of meekness. So dangerous did the situation appear that Peter and Yusuf put their heads together, and arranged for a regular system of guards and sentries on the outskirts of the town at night, and Yusuf, without parade, stationed in the Residency kitchen a trusted retainer of his own, whose duty it was to taste every article of food prepared for Gilbert.

Gilbert, on his side, went on his way without regard-

ing either these precautions or the need of them. To the Donnellans, when they arrived, and to Peter, he seemed to be throwing himself feverishly into activities of all sorts, as if his great desire was not to allow himself time to think. He superintended personally the erection of the Mission buildings, he took long journeys by boat and through the jungle to establish in their posts the new helpers he had brought out with him, he set on foot a statistical survey of the population and resources of the country—now possible for the first time owing to the increase of European assistance—and he planned a huge scheme for making a commercial harbour at the mouth of the river. Even the idle Malays seemed roused by the magnitude of his projects. Peter had kept them duly informed of the warmth of his reception at home, and the honour conferred upon him by the Queen, and they awoke to the fact that they had among them a very great man, whose often troublesome activities might have important results for themselves. His evening receptions were always crowded by respectful hearers, and—what pleased him much more—by chiefs who had conceived the idea of taking some small step in advance on their own account for their people's benefit, and were shyly anxious for his advice and approval.

Into this improving state of affairs the news of the agitation against Gilbert in England fell like a bomb-shell. It became known in some mysterious way with which there was no coping. The attacks of the *Eastern Tribune* were naturally read and discussed by all the Bandeir Europeans, since Singapore was their metropolis, their link with home and Empire, but this did not account for the knowledge of them possessed by the natives. It seemed probable that the articles were translated into Malay, and either distributed as broadsheets or circulated by word of mouth through the sailors of the trading schooners, but Gilbert disdained to allow any enquiry into the matter. Nothing was said of the strong body of opinion in his favour, nor of the arguments of his friends in his defence, and

the facts were skilfully manipulated to produce the impression that his day was over, and Bandeir about to return to its former state of anarchy. Nor were the reports from home which arrived by the mails much more comforting. Charles wrote dolefully that while Gilbert's supporters had been victorious in the House of Commons, and it was officially announced that there was no intention of enquiring into his conduct, private advices convinced him that an enquiry had been determined upon, but that it was to be launched from India and as secretly as possible, presumably that there might be no chance of tampering with the evidence. This was particularly disappointing, because the three letters which Charles had sent to the *Times* seemed really to have turned the scale and rehabilitated Gilbert in public opinion, but the other side had countered them with an absolutely irresistible argument in the substantial person of Mr Richard Barge.

Mr Barge was the hero of the hour, addressing meetings in London and the Provinces with becoming apologies for his deficiencies as a speaker, but warming speedily into a natural pathos which moved his audiences even to tears. He told of his shipwreck on the coast of Jhalábor, and his rescue from the hungry waves by that simple pastoral people the Taropans, of his idyllic life among them until such primitive arts of civilisation as he was qualified to impart gave them so high an opinion of him that they insisted on his becoming their chief. "And that, gents, was the destruction of those pore people, and of me 'appy little 'ome." Not through Mr Barge's own fault, of course. Oh no, though he was the innocent cause of it. The fame of the peaceful and happy Taropan commonwealth appeared to have reached the ears of Capt. Berringer—(Shame!)—their next-door neighbour, so to speak. Of course he could not abide it, "'cause why, gents? It stands to reason as he hadn't no excuse to interfere with them so long as they behaved themselves." Hence, no doubt, grievous rage on the

part of Capturing Berringer, and a diabolical plot against the Taropan community. They were accused of piracy—"they that were more innocenter, gents, than the babe unborn"—and condemned to annihilation. Capturing Berringer himself, with his confederates—"and I can tell you all their names, gents"—came up the river on pretence of a peaceful mission, picked a quarrel to give them an excuse for war, sank the Taropan fishing-fleet with their ship's guns, and took possession of the town, from which the hapless inhabitants had retreated in terror. Taking his life in his hand, the heroic Barge ventured into the clutches of the invaders to intercede for his people. "They was taken aback, gents; that I will say, not expectin' to 'ave an Englishman to deal with. I s'pose they didn't just like to kill me, but if I had been a Taropan——!" But poor Mr Barge, though not killed, was dragged ruthlessly away, amid the wailings of his devoted subjects, to captivity in Bandeir, and there treated as a kind of convict, until he managed to make his escape, at the peril of his life. The description of his voyage to Singapore as a stowaway was harrowing in the extreme, and so were the shifts to which he had since been put to keep body and soul together without attracting the notice of Capturing Berringer, "who 'as his spies everywhere" (chorus of groans). Nothing but the hope of doing that justice to the dead Taropans which he had been unable to procure for them living had induced him to brave the dangers that beset him, and get into communication with the upright men who refused to see their pore black brethren trampled into the dust by any cove in brass buttons, however much he might call hisself a hossifer and a gentleman! (Storms of cheering.)

"You were right and I was wrong about the amiable Barge," said Gilbert to Peter. "We ought to have nipped him in the bud."

"Short of mislaying him overboard one dark night, no amount of nipping would have done *him* much

good," growled Peter. "My word! I'd almost go home to hear that scamp taking in those gullible hypocrites he's got hold of."

"Will you go, and confront him in one of his meetings?"

"Sort of grisly ghost from the sea?" Peter shook his head. "No, take far too long. Tell you what I will do—take the *Hope* and beat down to Swan River instanter."

"To enquire into his antecedents? Good notion. But it'll be uncommon tedious for you, all that way against the wind."

"No more tedious than running up to Singapore and waiting about for a possible, but not probable, steamship. And once I get to Perth, the monsoon will bring me back in no time. If I don't bring back with me what will cut the ground from under Mr Richard Barge's feet, I'll eat my hat."

"It seems all that can be done at present. You had better make for Singapore on your return, instead of losing time by putting in here. If the Commission is appointed at all, it will probably be sitting."

"What can it do to you if it does sit?"

"Oh, play the mischief generally with everything I've done and every treaty I've made. That's about all, I suppose."

"And about enough, too. 'S'pose you wouldn't think of raising the point that as an independent ruler you ain't amenable to British jurisdiction?"

"I have thought of it, but what's the good? If I leave 'em to judge the thing behind my back, and tell all the lies they choose, what's to do if they declare *me* a pirate? Even if they don't send an expedition to blot out Bandeir from the face of the earth, they would exclude us from all British harbours, and what's to happen then?"

"The Dutch would jump at you and Bandeir."

"Thanks; I'm not sunk quite so low—yet—as to hand over to the Dutch what I've spent ten years in saving from them for England."

"Will they march you before them a prisoner?"

"I imagine not. The Commission ain't likely to have judicial powers. It will merely enquire and give its findings. I must look out some honest lawyer at Singapore and set him to act for me—I think I know the man."

"Now that's the most sensible thing I've heard you say for a long time. Set a thief to catch a thief, by all means."

"But for Heaven's sake, Peter, get back as soon as you can. It just strikes me that every single scrap of evidence that I can offer is tainted. All we can do is to show up theirs."

"Are you mad? *Tainted*—yours and mine included?"

"Precisely, and Briggs's, and Yusuf's, and the evidence of every European and Malay and tribesman in Bandeir. Why, man, we are all tarred with the same brush—all in it up to our necks, d'yre see? Since we can hardly expect the surviving Taropans to testify to the piratical practices of their deceased relatives, all the evidence I can offer is that of my own agents and dependants. You can imagine the pretty play a sharp barrister could make with it at the Old Bailey. Why, even the Nodding Mandarin"—this was a venerable Chinaman who was regarded as the unofficial head and representative of the community transferred from Dinkop—"is open to suspicion as having received favours from me."

"Well," said Peter, after a pause of consternation, "if I have to explore Australia, I'll smash up Barge, no fear. But in case it takes the better part of the century to do it, you had better set that lawyer chap of yours to hunting up some shipmasters who have had experience of the Taropans' little ways in times past. Even one ship plundered would clear you, I suppose."

"At least it would throw a doubt on the character of the plaintiff's attorney," said Gilbert, smiling. But the smile passed quickly, and he brought his fist down

on the table with a slam. "No, Peter, I can't joke about it! It's no joking matter. You know as well as I do that the mere rumour that I am to be pulled up will set Bandeir in a ferment, and stimulate the Jhalábor people to fresh tricks. To please these miserable, sneaking, creeping reptiles at home, all I have done here is to be endangered, if not destroyed. If we want help from a warship again, we may whistle for it, for no naval man will dare to co-operate with us. The Dutch will flaunt their flag over the tribes I have pacified for England. Well, take the *Hope* and do what you can, and perhaps we shall be able to save something out of the wreck."

The *Hope* sailed away, taking Peter out of sight and hearing of Bandeir for months, and Gilbert, having made his arrangements with the Singapore barrister he had pitched upon to defend him, had nothing to do but wait. Almost simultaneously came the news of the appointment of the Commission and the summons to appear before it. The Commissioners were appointed from India, the senior a high legal authority, and the other a civilian. Their instructions were secret, which imparted a pleasing flavour of uncertainty to the forthcoming proceedings. It was three years since any man-of-war had visited Bandeir, but one was now sent to convey Sir Gilbert Berringer and his witnesses—who were also his co-defendants—to Singapore. The necessity of depriving Bandeir of all its senior European officials at once was much to be regretted, but at least it might be hoped that their combined testimony would be so strong as to bring the enquiry quickly to an end, and permit of their return. Roger Berringer, who had happily come out too recently to be accused of participating in the hostilities against the Taropans, was left in charge in his brother's place, with orders to consult Yusuf in any difficulty, and to be guided by any advice he might give. The Donnellans remained at the Mission, for though Agnes was anxious to stand by Gilbert at his trial, her husband thought that it would have a

more tranquillising effect on the natives if they went on quietly with their work, showing a calm confidence that all would be well. The *Golden Helen* lay in the river under charge of her mate, since Captain Briggs was an important witness and must be torn from his ship.

Public feeling at Singapore seemed to have veered somewhat unexpectedly in Gilbert's favour when he arrived there. It was astonishing how many men who had signed the memorial against him made a point of calling upon him and emphasizing the fact that they had not done so in any spirit of hostility, but purely with the view that he ought to be given the opportunity of justifying himself. It is to be feared that the kind intentions of these gentlemen did not save them from some very plain speaking, for Gilbert told them bluntly that he would have been much obliged if they had left his reputation to take care of itself. The fact that he had been fetched away from Bandeir to answer for his conduct before what might be called either a Court or a Commission—it did not matter which—was bound to undermine his authority, since he had declined to take the extreme step of refusing to appear, and calling on his people to support him. Whatever the result of the enquiry, the fact would remain that doings of his had been called in question by the power which he had always held up to them as the incarnation of even-handed justice, and who was to know whether his future actions might not be blamed too?

The main asset of the accusers was undoubtedly Mr Richard Barge, who had been despatched from England by his sympathizers there in considerable state and much comfort, but as it appeared, distinctly against his will. He had expected the enquiry to be held at home, and had protested strongly against being required to risk his life by a return to the East, where any black-guard who thought to do Sir Gilbert Berringer a good turn would find it as easy as winkin' to stick a knife into him. He wanted his evidence taken on com-

mission and sent out, but Gilbert's supporters would not hear of his escaping cross-examination, and it is just possible that his own humanitarian friends were getting a little tired of him and were glad to get him off their hands. They gave him a triumphal send-off, which he accepted in the spirit of a meek martyr, and he travelled out as a kind of state prisoner. The careful watch kept over him might certainly be effective in preventing murderous attacks, but it also made impossible a dash for safety.

The day after the arrival of the *Bandeir* party at Singapore Captain Briggs was stretched out in a long chair on the shady verandah of his room in the hotel, spending the noonday hours in happy idleness. He had been visiting his friends among the merchants and on board the ships in harbour, and it may be—though he would have denied it vehemently—that they had been a little overpowering in their hospitality. The only thing that pointed to this, however, was a certain solemnity, suggesting a slight difficulty in fixing his eyes, in his gaze as it encountered a large and rubicund visage looking in at him from the level of the door-sill.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said comfortably. The visitor's name escaped him for the moment, but the circumstances were familiar. "Pokin' about under floors as usual—hey?"

"Not knowing what you may be meaning, cap'en, I can't say," returned the apparition, with dignity. "No, I won't come up, thankee. Only called in to enquire for a friend."

"No one asked you to come aboard that I'm aware of," said Captain Briggs, with equal solemnity. "Nor you weren't asked to stand there lookin' like a turnip-lantern made out of a beetroot. Who may the party be, pray?"

"That pal of your Guv'nor's—young seafaring chap—Tuan Pitah the blackfellows called him—where is he?"

"Don't you ask no questions and you'll be told

no lies." The words were accompanied by a waggish wink, which cost the speaker infinite labour.

"There's a fine way to answer a civil question! I only wanted to know if it was true he was gone to—Australya?"

"Australya it is, but we are expecting of him back any day. Now I hope you're satisfied," and Captain Briggs yawned portentously. On his recovery from the yawn he was relieved to see that the natural phenomenon which had vexed him had disappeared. Realising that he was not quite sure whether he had been asleep or awake, he decided wisely to say nothing about it. It did not even occur to him that what had passed could have any bearing on the fact, which became evident the next day, that there was a good deal of agitation in the enemy's camp. Messages passed excitedly between the office of the *Eastern Tribune*, Sansom, and the English lawyer who had been sent out to watch the case on behalf of the home sympathisers with the Taropans, and irreverent people found cause for ribald mirth in the excursions made by grave and reverend persons into the worst localities of the settlement. It was supposed that they were hunting up witnesses of sufficiently bad character in case their chief support, Mr Barge, who was reported to be very ill, should be unable to testify—or, said Gilbert's friends when Peter Tourneur had landed from the *Hope* primed with highly apposite information, lest he should consider it inadvisable to appear. But the excitement caused by these conjectures was nothing to that caused by the bombshell which was flung by the complainants on the second day of the Commission's sitting.

The first day was occupied solely by the reading of their credentials by the Commissioners, and one or two wrangles as to methods of procedure. The complainants' counsel asserted that Sir Gilbert Berringer ought to begin by proving his innocence—a large and lengthy task—and his counsel had little difficulty in showing that this was absurd when the

accusations against him had never been brought forward in form. The Commissioners supported him without hesitation, and the audience separated in the thrilling expectation of hearing the testimony of Mr Richard Barge on the morrow, and a cross-examination which was likely to be exceedingly spicy. Of this they were disappointed, but not of a sensation. The complainants' counsel rose, and in portentous accents of the deepest gloom deplored the fact that it was impossible for him to produce the witness who had the clearest knowledge of the iniquities which had been perpetrated. Mr Richard Barge had disappeared three days before, and though the most extensive and careful search had been made, not a trace of him could be discovered. The Commissioners would draw their own conclusions, for there could be no doubt who stood to benefit by the removal of this witness. Things looked black, certainly, for Gilbert, but his supporters had only time to glance at one another in dismay before his counsel was also on his feet. There was indeed little doubt who would profit by the disappearance of Richard Barge, he said. As for himself, it was the bitterest disappointment of his life, and it came as a cruel blow to Sir Gilbert Berringer. They had looked forward confidently to bringing out some most interesting facts with regard to the person on whom the complainants so trustfully relied. With the permission of the Commissioners, he would read aloud an official document just received from the West Australian authorities, and countersigned by the head of the convict establishment at Swan River. This set forth the history, so far as known—it ceased, perforce, for the authorities eight years ago—of Richard Braid, alias Dick the Bilker, alias the Gentlemanly Cove, alias Dicky Pipe-your-Eye. It appeared that he had been sent out to New South Wales in his youth by respectable parents who hoped to remove him from evil companions, but had very soon fallen in with worse. A remarkable career of crime had ended in

a conviction in Western Australia—he had made the Eastern settlements too hot to hold him—for a complicated series of ingenious frauds which had relegated him, so the authorities trusted, to hard work and spare diet for ten years. But it was clear that the prospect did not meet with his approval, for a reward was soon offered for him as an escaped convict. He had been traced a considerable distance up the coast and there lost sight of. It was supposed that he had been murdered by the natives, but it now appeared probable that he had been taken off by some Malay or Chinese boat and landed in Jhalábor. The description of Richard Braid given in West Australia corresponded absolutely with that of Richard Barge; and were further evidence necessary, a picture of the latter in the *Illustrated London News* in connection with one of the Bandeir meetings in London was recognised by the Swan River authorities as that of their late charge. It only remained to add that the evidence of the Taropans themselves showed that the man had not been shipwrecked among them, as he declared, but had been put ashore from a prahu; that he had taken advantage of dissensions in the tribe to make himself their king, and had held that position for two years, to the great advantage of their nefarious trade. He never went out with them to fight, but in strategy and diplomacy he was unequalled. But for the bright idea of extending his rule over the Dinkop territory before the Taropan boundaries were strictly delimited by Bandeir, he might still have been enjoying his dusky throne.

The loss of their chief witness was naturally a stunning blow to the complainants. They did their best to discredit the Swan River evidence, but the heart was gone out of them. And here it may be mentioned that Mr Barge never appeared again in Singapore. From Macao there filtered, after a time, rumours of a stout man with the gift of the gab, well dressed and well provided with money, who had landed from a junk arriving from the islands, and

thence drifted into the parti-coloured hell of the China ports, and it was surmised that he had contrived silently to steal away from what seemed likely to be a dangerous neighbourhood, but since Captain Briggs kept his own counsel, nothing was definitely known.

The remaining sittings of the Commission were chiefly remarkable for their number, length, and ineffectiveness. For some time no accusers appeared, but the Commissioners were determined to carry out their instructions, which were to examine into the accusations brought against Sir Gilbert Berringer, and if they had to sit waiting for them till Doomsday, they would do it. When Gilbert asked them at last to fix a time-limit, since Bandeir could hardly do without its ruler indefinitely, they refused, and proceeded to call and examine one by one the signatories to the memorial, most of whom declared brightly that they had signed it as an act of friendship to Sir Gilbert. One or two were still staunch foes, however, Sansom among the chief, and in coping with his allegations there arose the difficulty which Gilbert had anticipated, that all his witnesses were in his own employ. The senior Commissioner was clearly disposed to exclude their evidence on this account, and it began to look as though Gilbert, even if uncondemned, would have to go through life unjustified, when the waning interest in the case was roused anew by a dramatic incident. A stranger seated in the court rose and asked to be allowed to give evidence. Sworn, he proved to be a high Dutch official, who happened to be passing through Singapore on his way home on furlough, and had attended the enquiry out of curiosity. The territory of which he had been in charge abutted on the hinterland of Bandeir, and though he and Sir Gilbert Berringer had had many differences, he could not as a man of honour withhold his testimony to the peace and good government established among the tribes, nor to the service to humanity rendered by the subjugation of the Rebas

and Taropans, to whose piracies a number of Dutch ships and seamen had fallen victims in earlier years. The vindication was complete, and Gilbert, panting to return to Bandeir, looked for nothing less than an honourable acquittal at once.

But the Commissioners thought otherwise. Gilbert must show that no innocent person had ever been involved in his vengeance on the pirates, and also that none of his own native auxiliaries had ever transgressed the laws of civilised warfare by taking the heads of the enemy. He could only declare that he had most scrupulously endeavoured to save non-combatants and surrendered foes, and that he had often been in bad odour with his allies owing to his prohibition of head-hunting, and this was not enough. He must be conducted through the whole of his warlike transactions, and prove that he had taken properly humane precautions in each. Desperate, he sent Peter and Captain Briggs off to Bandeir in the *Hope*, and dragged out a month or so longer at Singapore, after which he was suffered to depart. The Commissioners had still to consider their report, which might be expected to issue in the course of six months or so, but they or their *entourage* were sufficiently human to allow it to be understood that in all probability they would report that the charges against Sir Gilbert Berringer had not been proved.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LOVE'S MESSENGER.

HER Majesty's ship *Gadwal* carried Gilbert and his witnesses back to Bandeir, and since the Royal Navy had been on its trial as well as he, the spirits of all on board were high. The repression of piracy, involving boat expeditions and operations on shore, was a popular service, and it was privately intimated to Gilbert, by representatives of all ranks, that the sooner he found some more tribes to coerce into good behaviour, the better would the *Gadwals* be pleased. He could not help being amused by these hints, though they echoed the honest belief of his enemies that he was a fire-eating Jingo, seeking diligently for more territory to annex, but some work of the kind was nearer at hand than he expected. As the corvette entered the Bandeir River, a light prahu shot out from the bank, a man on board waving frantically a bundle of letters. Speed was reduced, and the man taken on board. He singled out Gilbert at once, and laid the papers respectfully at his feet, but would say nothing in reply to the questions of the Bandeir officials, who, observing that he wore the signs of mourning, tried to get him to talk while their leader tore open the first letter. It was from Peter, short and hurried:—

“Have to report that when I got here I found town in flames. Eusoff murdered by a band of blackguards from the King. Roger left for dead, but recovering. Mission and all European houses

destroyed, Donnellans and other whites save *Golden Helen*. Am starting at once in pursuit of murderers. Please send on the Doctor here, but for goodness' sake go straight to Jellaubor yourself, and take order with that old sinner. Any delay would be fatal."

There was a letter from Mr Donnellan, and another from Agnes, but Gilbert left them for further consideration. With a changed visage he returned to his host.

"Cornwall, I have shocking news—frightful. Have you power to take your ship to Jhalábor at once, to help me bring the King to his senses, or must you wait for orders?"

"If you can assure me that the emergency is sufficiently serious, my duty is to act on my own discretion," replied Captain Cornwall, with great gravity.

"You may take it from me that it is. The Jhalábor people have burnt Bandeir, and murdered my friend Yusuf, the King's son. The Europeans seem to have escaped. Tourneur has the pursuit in hand, and we must take Jhalábor by surprise. The Doctor and the rest had better go up in the proa at once to Bandeir. They will have plenty to do."

As quickly as possible the officials were despatched up the river, with instructions to do all they could in tranquillising and encouraging the people, keeping order and helping to hunt down the murderers, and Gilbert, his face set northwards again, applied himself to discover the details of this new and heavy blow. Edward Donnellan's letter gave the fullest and clearest account. A month before he wrote, a motley band of courtiers and hangers-on had arrived from Jhalábor, ostensibly to bear the King's congratulations to Yusuf on some family anniversary. There were so many of them, and their stay was so indefinite in its announced duration, that they threatened to eat the Prince out of house and home, and Mr Donnellan advised him seriously to pack them off without ceremony. But this was contrary to all Malay ideas of hospitality and royal courtesy, and Yusuf could not bring himself to do it,

though he confided to the missionary that the visitors were talking, both to him and his people, in a way that made him very uneasy. Exactly what their proposals were he would not say, though he constantly lamented Gilbert's absence and his own lack of a counsellor.

The end came suddenly and unexpectedly. Roger at the Residency was roused one night by the sound of shots from the palace, and without waiting to summon help from the *Golden Helen*, collected the guards and the few servants available and went to see what was wrong. It was difficult to find out precisely what had happened at the palace, but it was believed that one of the Jhalábor visitors had made love to a slave-girl, and induced her to admit him into the private portion of the house. The evidence of the few terrified survivors went to show that Yusuf had been roused from sleep by an invasion of his guests, who sought to force upon him some condition which he refused. Backed by his foster-brother and two of his women, he had defended himself stoutly, and when help failed to arrive, flung himself upon the crises of his assailants, and died fighting. Somehow or other the building had caught fire during the struggle, and the invaders, knowing that a quantity of gunpowder was stored there, fled in a panic, meeting Roger and his men at the entrance. The surprise seemed to have been mutual, and Roger's followers left him in the lurch and promptly bolted. He must have been lying wounded in the verandah, for he was found afterwards unconscious in the street, flung there by the explosion when it occurred. Whether the fires at the Residency and the Mission were caused by sparks from the conflagration at the palace, or deliberately by the Jhalábor men, was uncertain—but Mr Donnellan was inclined to think the latter, since one of the visitors was a Mullah, who had come to him several times for heated discussion. The light cane-built houses burned like tinder, and the confusion was terrible until an armed party came on shore, despatched from the ship as soon as the flames were seen. The European ladies were taken on board, with the orphans

under Agnes's charge, and the men set to work to save what they could of the town, much hampered by the attitude of the inhabitants, who refused to interfere with what was obviously Kismet. To the immense relief of all, the *Hope* arrived the next morning, bringing Peter and Captain Briggs, and steps were at once taken for the pursuit of the murderers—of which no one had had time to think before. Roger was under Agnes's care on board, and it was hoped that he would recover.

"It's quite clear what the trouble was," said Gilbert gloomily to Captain Cornwall, when they had both read the letter. "This wretched Commission has had the precise effect I expected, and made the Jhalábor people think I was done for. So they made up their minds to get poor Yusuf to join with 'em in kicking the whites out, relying on the support of Smollett and Clare and Richards at home. A nice set of jobs that precious crew have to answer for! But I'd have forgiven them if it hadn't been for poor Yusuf—the finest gentleman and honestest fellow I ever met."

"Your view of the natives ain't precisely that of the average Anglo-Indian," said the sailor curiously.

"I hope I know a gentleman when I see him," said Gilbert, with some stiffness. "And Yusuf was my friend. For ten years he has stood by me, even when he didn't understand what I was driving at, getting into perpetual hot water with his own people, and trying uncommon hard to make himself into a European to please me—as if that was what I wanted! And now to end like this!"

"But the matter don't end here, I presume? What do you propose to do at Jhalábor?"

"Have it out with that unnatural old wretch his father," said Gilbert grimly.

"And carry off another princeling to take the poor chap's place?"

"No." There was no hesitation in Gilbert's voice. "I have tried long enough ruling Bandeir with the Malays. It was just possible with Yusuf there, but

there is no one like him. The King will have to make the district over to me absolutely—subject, of course, to the tribute, of which I should say there would be mighty little to send this year, when the claims for compensation have been met.”

“And when you have got your firman, or *sunnud*, or charter, or whatever you call it here, confirmed, you’ll make over Bandeir to England?”

Gilbert looked at him. “Is it likely?” he asked.

Captain Cornwall was surprised. “No one denies you have been shockingly treated,” he said slowly, “but it’s rayther a big thing to set up a brand-new state in your own name, ain’t it? Not that I mean to throw any doubt on your ability to manage it, but there is the future to think of.”

“The future must take care of itself. I have too much tenderness for Bandeir to put her under the thumb of Smollett, Richards & Co.—even if they would touch her with the tip of a finger. I have been practically an independent ruler all these years, and now I shall become one in reality. If I am forced to it, I shall seek the protection of the United States.”

“Good heavens, my dear sir! I am not sure that I ought to abet you in these schemes.”

“It is not a scheme, I assure you. It will only become a possibility if I am driven to it. Believe me, I hope to hold my ground alone. Holland I will not have, England will not have me—I must take my stand as Berringer of Bandeir.”

“And founder of a Berringer dynasty?”

“That remains to be seen. I am not likely to marry, but my brother Roger is a fine fellow, and the elder one at home has three promising boys. A Berringer dynasty by all means, if necessary. Why not?”

“I don’t like it—I don’t like it,” muttered the sailor, pinching his small neat whisker.

“Then, for Heaven’s sake, put back, and land me at the mouth of Bandeir River. I will get my own

ship and take her up to Jhalábor and settle matters with the King."

"Stuff, my good sir! D'ye think the *Gadwal* will leave you in the lurch in that fashion? Why, I should have a mutiny on board. No, British subjects have been injured and are in need of redress, and hang me if I don't get it for 'em! You are a British subject at present, ain't you? You may declare yourself Grand Panjandrum of Crim-Tartary afterwards, if you like. It's no business of mine."

"Your hand, Captain," said Gilbert quickly. "Why are not all Englishmen like you?"

"My dear sir, you might as well ask why they are not all like yourself, and you are what the naturalists would call a unique specimen. A specimen about to become extinct, too—more's the pity!"

"As an Englishman, I suppose. The Anglo-Bandeirean type of the future, shall we say?"

"Then Heaven help the neighbours of Bandeir!" said Captain Cornwall, and refused to see that he was looking at things from the standpoint of Gilbert's enemies.

When the Jhalábor River was reached, it became obvious that the people had made an unsuccessful attempt to combine the possession of a guilty conscience with the appearance of a clear one. They had evidently had a very fair idea that a visit of some kind was to be looked for, since the commander of the war-prahu at the river-mouth was prepared with a welcome from the King for Gilbert and Captain Cornwall, but also with the request that they would on no account take the *Gadwal* into the river, but go up in the boats. This polite invitation to put their heads into the tiger's mouth they disregarded, with the result that as soon as the stream grew sufficiently narrow, they were brought up against a remarkably solid boom. The boats had to be lowered to cut through it, and while the crews were thus engaged, a dropping fire of bullets came from the jungle. A high-elevation shot or two from the

Gadwal's bow-chasers stopped the nuisance, but it suggested eloquently what might have happened if the boats had gone up unsupported by the ship. The boom once disposed of, progress was easy until the city itself was reached, when the *Gadwal* was greeted by a fusilade from every description of firearm ensconced in every conceivable place. She replied with one shot dropped into a cluster of prahus, and another into an erection of palisades remotely resembling a fort, and the Jhalábor people appeared to feel that honour was satisfied, for they evacuated at once all their points of vantage and bolted for the jungle. The look-out at the masthead reported that the inhabitants of the palace were streaming out at the rear like disturbed ants, and Captain Cornwall, who had several men disabled by scraps of iron and other unconventional bullets, dropped another shot in front of them, as a gentle hint that he had no desire for jungle fighting. They tumbled back, helter-skelter, and leaving the first lieutenant in charge of the ship with orders to see that they did not break away again, Captain Cornwall landed with Gilbert and a strong armed party. They made a triumphal progress through the streets, for everyone fled from the sight of them, and the only opposition offered when they reached the palace was on a question of etiquette. The King was mourning his murdered son, and it was not proper to disturb him. But even Malay etiquette recognised the gentle compulsion of a threat to blow open the gate, and they marched in, to be received by a very badly frightened monarch, whose nervousness showed itself in a strong determination to do all the talking.

Seated at the King's right hand, with the seamen massed in front of them, the visitors were welcomed with hysterical effusion as fellow-mourners. It was only what was to be expected of Datu Brinja that he should fly with all the speed of his fire-vessel to condole with his friend's father on his cruel murder. Grief had turned the King's beard white in a single night, and robbed him of at least ten years of life.

His future existence would be a desert, since he was deprived of the affection and respect in which Yusuf had never failed. Rather would he have seen every other member of his house put to death before his eyes than lost this one. The sons left to him were poor wretched creatures, little better than idiots, especially the one who would now naturally succeed to the throne. Gilbert pricked up his ears, for a method began to make itself apparent in the madness of grief, and the King noticed the change, and talked all the faster. Could it have been imagined that there existed men sufficiently abandoned to murder Yusuf, without having even the excuse that they wished to put a worthier in his place? Yet such there were—or rather had been. Had been—yes. Could Datu Brinja dream that the far-stretching power of the King would suffer such miscreants to cumber the ground an instant longer when the news of their deed had once reached his outraged ears? They were all dead, every one, and here were their heads.

This was the opening for a dramatic interlude, when two sackfuls of ghastly trophies were emptied on the floor, and the contents punctiliously counted through, with the name of the quondam owner of each appended, before Gilbert and Captain Cornwall, who expressed themselves hastily as satisfied, and begged for the removal of the heads.

The King, having taken breath, went on again. What could he do for Datu Brinja, who he knew was suffering equally with himself in the loss of Yusuf? He had given much thought to the matter, and had come to the conclusion that the only means by which he could properly testify his friendship and esteem was by making Bandeir over to him in full gift, free of all tribute or tax. There it was, he presented it to him; Bandeir was his from this moment. Gilbert took a mean advantage of the impressive pause that followed this moment of expansion, and spoke. He had no desire to sunder Bandeir from the parent-kingdom, and would continue to pay the tribute, but

he would be glad if a fresh charter could be made out at once, investing him and his heirs with the sovereignty of the district in perpetuity. It seemed as though the King were a little dismayed in being so promptly taken at his word, though not to the full extent of what he offered. A second request, and a hint that Gilbert's time was limited, was necessary before the King called up a scribe, and in a faltering voice bade him prepare the charter. Then he waxed lachrymose again, and enquired wildly of the roof, the floor, and the chuckling seamen in front, what more he could do to show his unalterable affection for the English, and for Datu Brinja in particular, or his respect for the memory of his son. Captain Cornwall filled up the pause this time. In very decisive accents he reminded the King that Her Majesty's ship had been fired upon and the British flag insulted, and enquired what reparation he proposed to offer.

This seemed to be quite an unexpected issue, and even the King was struck dumb for the moment, and had to call in his councillors to give advice. They advised a salute to the flag and monetary compensation to the wounded sailors, but neither of these was sufficient, and finally Captain Cornwall, while accepting the salute, demanded the demolition of the palisade fort, which was granted with so much readiness as suggested that the place had been regarded rather as a menace than a protection. The seamen were marched off at once to the work of destruction, which they carried out with monumental thoroughness and extreme delight, and when it was over, returned to the palace for the ceremony of Gilbert's investiture. The charter was read through and found to be satisfactory, the King and his nobles appended their seals, and Captain Cornwall his signature as witness, and after the performance of the proper ceremonies the invaders retired peacefully, to the obvious relief of the court.

"Well, we have come out of this job rather neatly,

at any rate," said Captain Cornwall, as he and Gilbert stood on the poop to salute the Jhalábor flag.

"As far as looks go. Of course you know as well as I do that whoever those heads may have belonged to, the real culprits have got off scot-free?"

"The actual murderers, do you mean?"

"Perhaps not that, but the people who planned the thing—the King's women and courtiers, and so on."

"But how could they have been got at?"

"They couldn't—without extinguishing every soul about the court. That's the vile part of the affair—you have to be satisfied with scapegoats when you want to punish the guilty."

"Well, the scapegoats have been dealt with precious thoroughly, by the number of those heads. Pah! ain't you satisfied yet, you bloodthirsty individual?"

"As satisfied as I am likely to be, I suppose. It's not as though any number of executions could bring poor Yusuf back."

They sailed down the coast without adventure, and steamed up the Bandeir river to the desolated town. The sight was one to make Gilbert's heart ache, for all the more solid buildings, which had been the monuments of his rule, seemed to have disappeared, and only the ramshackle native houses along the river were left.

"This decides me," he said. "When I build in future, it shall be with stone. No more native houses for me."

"You found Bandeir a town of huts, and you'll leave it a city of palaces—eh?" said Captain Cornwall. "Fine idea, but it'll take a lifetime to carry out. Where's the stone to come from?"

"We must quarry it in the hills, and float it down the river. Yes, it will take years, but it's got to be done."

"Don't know how you'll manage about foundations, in this slime," said the sailor, looking at the oozy banks. "Looks to me as if you'll get to the centre of the earth before you find firm ground."

"We can but try," said Gilbert, more doubtfully. "Ah, here's the Padri coming on board!"

A boat from the *Golden Helen* brought Edward Donnellan, whose report was fairly cheerful. Roger was doing well, there were rumours that Peter had caught up and defeated the murderers of Yusuf, and the people's confidence in Datu Brinja did not appear to have been shaken by what had happened. They were as peaceful, as obedient, and it must be confessed, as apathetic as ever, taking no steps to replace their destroyed dwellings otherwise than by building palm-leaf shanties for those who could not quarter themselves on friends.

A busy time for Gilbert succeeded the departure of the *Gadwal*. He had to make his plans for the rebuilding of the town on European lines—much to the disgust of his subjects—and to accommodate himself and the others whose houses had been destroyed in temporary dwellings pending the arrival of the first consignment of stone, for which he had sent one of his lieutenants on an expedition into the tribal country, with an elaborate explanatory letter from himself to the chiefs. Such mining as he had allowed hitherto had warned him to be careful. To take even gold-dust and antimony out of the territory of the tribes had caused some unpleasantness, and to carry off large blocks of stone might easily be misrepresented as showing an intention to remove the whole country piecemeal. His labours were interrupted by the return of Peter, very ill with fever and carried in a litter, but triumphant, since he had overtaken the murderers and accounted for them all, burning their bodies in one great pyre to strike terror into the hearts of all other evil-disposed persons. Gilbert frowned at this, for it was no part of his method to terrorise the people by punishment violently opposed to their ideas, but there was something else that struck him.

"But the King said he had killed the murderers," he objected. "Whose were the heads we saw?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," said Peter weakly.

"Anyhow, I know ours were the real criminals, for they were loaded up with the plunder of the palace—things I recognised."

"But how did the King get those heads?"

"Cut them off other people, I imagine. What's it signify? If they belonged to Jhalábor, they deserved it for plenty of other things, if not for this."

"On the whole," said Gilbert drily, "it seems just as well that that precious Commission has finished sitting."

"Oh, wait till I have a grudge against you," said Peter, "and just see how I'll raise heaven and earth with this latest iniquity of yours! Getting two sets of people—both innocent, no doubt—killed for one crime, indeed! Sir Gilbert Berringer, you are a disgrace to civilisation! But I don't feel up to stating my candid opinion of you just now."

"Better take a rest, certainly, and enjoy your mail when it comes. The *Hope* is signalled at the mouth of the river."

The mail came in that evening, but Peter was in no condition to read his letters, even had he felt any particular anxiety to do so. His tough constitution had held out so long that the local fever seemed determined to have its revenge now it had once got hold of him. It was two days before Gilbert was able to see him for a talk.

"I think I shall send you home, Peter," he said.

"Me? home?" cried Peter anxiously. "What have I done?"

"Nothing, you old fool! For your good, don't you know?"

"Oh, thanks! You can save your trouble, then."

"But Roger has got to go, and you can look after him. And Agnes wants to send young Eddy home. He's getting too big for this climate."

"Yes, it's like me to go home in charge of a Berringer menagerie," said Peter rudely. "Not any for me, thanks."

"But they seem to think uncommon badly of your father."

"Now you know as well as I do that seeing me wouldn't make him any better. The further apart the Governor and I are, the happier for us both."

"I always thought it uncommonly good of him to let you go to sea. I should never have expected it."

"Yes, but why was it? He wanted me to go to Oxford—scholarship, of course. But that meant any amount of extra work. He must be my coach, naturally, and he tried it for a week. He found out he couldn't stand it just in time, when I had my mind made up to run away to sea that night. It was like a monkey in a lion's den."

"You were like the monkey, you mean. Well, I see all that, but he ain't likely to want you to go to Oxford now. And your sister Emily—Mrs Sedhurst—writes, and asks me to spare you. Says it's seven years since you were at home, and then only for a week."

"Well, I couldn't help it if I was lucky enough to get a new ship almost at once," growled Peter. "Tell you what, I couldn't feel comfortable at home. Not my style, by a long chalk."

"Well, they want you now, at any rate. You ought to be there, if anything happens to your father, to help your sisters and all that sort of thing, don't you know. And, Peter——"

"Charles and Sedhurst can help them a lot better than I can. Well?"

"And when you come back, you might bring Lettice with you."

"What? me? Lettice? D'ye think I'm mad, or what?"

"Not to keep house for you, but to marry me."

"Walker!" said Peter, with ineffable contempt.

"My good fellow, it's perfectly true."

"You to talk of getting married—as if you hadn't a thousand better things to do!"

"Why not say a thousand more agreeable things at once? We all know you ain't sentimental."

"Sentimental—I should hope not! And yesterday I would have knocked any man down who told me that you were!"

"Don't talk as if all your young enthusiasms were cruelly blighted. You must have known about Lettice and me all along."

"Never! You used to colloque together over books and all that, but nothing more! And of all the ordinary girls——! Why, Theodosia and Emily would be considered decent-looking, I suppose, but Lettice never had any looks to speak of, and now—why, she's older than I am. And you might marry anyone!"

"Much obliged, but I don't want anybody but Lettice, you see. Why, Peter, you ass, you're behind the times. Lettice is a most distinguished person. Have you forgot her books? And she has a better head than most men. D'ye know it was she who wrote those letters to the *Times* which we said Charles couldn't have written to save his life? If I could have brought her out with me ten years ago I should have been saved a lot of the mistakes I have made. She always gave me sound advice."

Peter's face cleared. "Oh, I see how it is!" he said. "Trust me, I'll manage it for you. Lettice ain't the sort of person to hold you bound now because you philandered a bit with her ten years ago. I'll give her a good talking-to, and I do her the credit to believe she'll be quite sensible."

"If you talk nonsense much longer, Peter, you'll make me angry." The sound of Gilbert's voice made Peter look up in bewilderment. "Why, you fool, can't you see that I *want* her? Twice I have lost her because she thought she was more wanted at home than here, now perhaps there may be a chance for me at last. It was uncommon good-natured of Emily to write as she did, and I shan't forget it."

"But the state of things here—all you have to do?"

Gilbert pulled a wry face. "Well, perhaps this would not have been the precise time I should have chosen for asking her to come out, but she'll take things as she finds 'em, bless her! Don't be afraid, Peter; you won't have to deliver any messages. I'll give you a letter for her. If she's free, you give it her; if not, you bring it back to me."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FEAR OF LIFE.

PETER reached Sniddingly just a fortnight after his father's death. Mr Tourneur had never regained the power of speech or motion, but he remained conscious almost to the last, as Lettice realised with painful distinctness when he turned his dying eyes deliberately from her and fixed them on Emily's face. All the long years of dutiful service, the months of daily and nightly tendance, went for nothing by reason of one impatient sentence, surprised from her in an unguarded moment. It seemed astonishing to her that her sisters did not notice their father's gesture and comment on it, but to them it seemed perfectly natural. Emily had always been his favourite, and of course his last look would be for her. Lettice realised that if there was injustice, she was the only person to perceive it, and the fact deepened the feeling of isolation which encompassed her. It was not wonderful that she should be depressed, for body and mind had been working at high pressure for many months, and the strain on her nerves had been unceasing. She had pulled through. No physical breakdown had disgraced the family by rendering it necessary to seek a nurse from outside, and the expenses of the house and of Mr Tourneur's illness had all been met. But she herself was a failure—a dead failure. She had sacrificed youth and love for her father, and had not succeeded in winning him—

may, she had alienated him further. She felt that she did not care what happened to her, nor did it signify to anyone, and she sat passive while Theodosia and Emily wrangled, with voices decorously lowered, over her future. Since the whole course of her life had gone to rob her of the power of deciding for herself, perhaps it was as well that there was someone to decide for her.

Mr Tourneur's will was not read publicly. Mr Berringer and Sir John Sedhurst were the executors, and having called Charles and Ralph into consultation, they informed Lettice that all her father left was for her, and she would have something like forty pounds a year. To the honour of Charles and Ralph be it said, that not even their wives ever guessed that Mr Tourneur had left the little he had to leave equally between his three daughters. It had originally been left first to Aunt Sophy for her life, but a codicil added when she went to live with Miss Housman explained that she was now otherwise provided for. The Squire and Sir John looked at one another with something like indignation when they realised the truth, and neither of them could rest until their sons—the power lay with them under the laws of that day—had renounced any participation in the estate on behalf of their respective wives. "Poor fellow! of course he thought she would marry," said the Squire, loyal to his dead friend, and wondered whether there was any chance that Gilbert might still remain faithful after so many discouragements. Charles and Ralph were very sensible and clear-headed about it, as well as most anxious to behave liberally to Lettice. They had no illusions about her. She was an old maid, and it was the business of her male relatives to see that she was enabled to live in such genteel, if modest, style as would reflect no disgrace, while imposing no further expense, upon themselves.

The necessity of quitting the Rectory was the first thing that pierced Lettice's deadness of spirit. Her life seemed bound up in it. Everything—all her

spiritual adventures, all her emotional experiences—that had happened to her for more than twenty years, almost as long as she had been conscious of her mental states at all, was linked with, if not bounded by, the grey flint walls of the old low-lying house. She acquiesced quietly, with the good sense that might have been expected, when it was pointed out to her that she must give place to the new Rector, but the thought returned upon her in sleepless nights, and gripped her heart with absolute terror. In comparison with this dreadful necessity, the question of where she should go seemed very unimportant. She had only herself and Jerusha to consider, for Rebecca, now past work, was provided for by a small annuity from Mr Tourneur, and could be regarded as a lady at large. Forty pounds a year would provide house-room and daily bread for both of them—the purchasing power of money was greater in those days,—for butter she must depend upon what she could make by her books. *Lillah* was finished, and though she viewed it with jaundiced eyes, unable to regard it apart from the anxieties and interruptions that had beset its growth, and told herself despairingly that it was the worst thing she had ever written, yet it promised to make her independent of her brothers-in-law, for which she must be ever grateful to it.

It was very quickly decided that Lettice had better not remain in Sniddingly. There was no suitable house, for one thing, and Theodosia was eloquent upon the bad taste of remaining to spy upon the new Rector, while Emily represented in vigorous terms the unwisdom of staying to be patronised by Mrs Berringer. But there their unanimity ended. Emily was urgent that Lettice should come to live with her and Ralph—their house was large enough, thank goodness! to give her a sitting-room to herself and take in Jerusha as well. Theodosia, conscious that she could not offer anything of the kind, since her house would only just hold her family, thought it would be much more suitable if Lettice took a

“convenient and elegant residence” that was to let in her village. Lettice knew it well. It was like a red brick box, with white palings and a green door, a narrow passage from front to back, and a square sitting-room at each side; but she chose it rather than the luxuries offered by Emily, since she suspected Emily—most unjustly, had she but known—of wishing to have at hand a natural ally in her not infrequent disputes with Ralph. She announced her decision and stuck to it, despite Emily’s annoyance and mysterious prophecies that she would be sorry for it yet, and her sisters transferred the arena of combat to the question of the furniture Lettice should take with her.

Into this atmosphere came Peter, like a visitant from another world. Never was an unhappy man more utterly out of place, more at a loss for occupation. The years at Bandeir, spent in exclusively masculine society, following upon his life at sea, had made him what his sisters united in feeling, if not in proclaiming him, impossible. He smoked—or at least he wished to smoke—everywhere and at all times, a thing unheard of in polite English society at that day, and much of his time was spent in tramping up and down the garden with a huge cheroot, the village children peering in at him fearfully between the bars of the gate. The housewife of the fifties tolerated smoking only in the kitchen at night, after the maids had gone to bed, and Peter’s brothers-in-law, with all the *bonhomie* of the fox that lost its tail, advised him to become for the nonce a well-regulated person such as they were, and submit. Peter, conscious of a distinct grievance in being in England at all, made up his mind to get back to Bandeir as soon as possible. The voyage had set him up completely, and he was certain Bandeir could not do without him. He had left Gilbert absorbed in experiments with stone foundations, all pointing to the unpalatable truth that the natives were probably wiser than he had thought when they adopted their characteristic style of building, and

was certain that he would find him disabled with fever when he got back.

But there was the matter of Gilbert's letter to settle first. Peter held it back for the first day or two out of sheer panic. Theodosia looked nobly commanding in her mourning, Emily pretty and pathetic, Lettice merely sallow and incredibly plain. Peter felt outraged when he thought of inflicting such a wife on his hero. Gilbert's assurances weakened in his mind, and he began almost to plan means of deliverance for him. Lettice's side of the case he only remembered so far as to decide that a woman with that face could not possibly have any feelings—or at any rate, ought not to have. But he could not go back to Gilbert with his errand undone, and at last he caught Lettice in the passage one day, and thrust the letter at her reluctantly, with a muttered, "I was to give you that."

"From Gilbert?" The sudden glow changed her to an extent he would have thought impossible, but even while he stared at her incredulously, it faded as suddenly as it had risen, and he saw only the pale face and indeterminate features which, with the love of beauty inherited from his father, he felt that he almost hated. His voice was bitter as he growled—

"Aye, and you ought to be jolly thankful to get it!"

A vague feeling of uneasiness beset Lettice as she took the packet, and retired to her room to read it in peace, but she did not formulate it to herself any more than she did the rush of joy produced by the sight of Gilbert's writing.

"MY DEAR LETTICE,

"I trust you will acquit me of callousness in intruding upon your sacred grief"—

She wondered how he could have known of her father's death, then realised that Peter's orders must have been merely conditional.

—"But I feel that I must seize the opportunity afforded by your brother's journey home and return here. As long as I have known you, the welfare

of others has engrossed your thoughts; let me urge you, though at this late date, to consult your own happiness at last. I confess I feel some delicacy in implying that this end would be attained by permitting Peter to bring you out to Singapore, where I would meet you, and we could be married. I am a poor creature in these days, my credit endangered here and destroyed at home, bankrupt of reputation, of spirits, almost of hope—but this gift I trust that you, like the fabled Pandora, will restore to me. Peter will have imparted to you the accumulated misfortunes which have befallen me of late, culminating in the destruction of my dwelling, so that for the present I must ask you to ‘rough it’ in a Malay house. I dare not paint the prospect in glowing hues, yet our beloved Agnes maintains her health to a gratifying extent in this climate, and I trust you will be enabled to do the same. I cannot promise you a very large share of my society, for my attention is claimed all day by innumerable objects, and at any moment, without notice, I may receive an imperative summons to undertake a distant and warlike expedition, upon which it would be out of the question for a delicate female to accompany me.

“I set out with the determination to lay before you frankly the disadvantages attaching to the position I offer you, and to myself it seems to present nothing but disadvantages. I dare not urge you to accept it. All I will venture to say is that you will find in Bandeir an admirable scope for those self-sacrificing qualities which have always distinguished you. Of the assistance you have already rendered to my cause here, when it was at its lowest in the public estimation, I will not revolt your retiring modesty by speaking—believe me only that it is appreciated”—

Lettice caught her breath. Somehow—somehow—he had found out about the money! He knew the secret which was never to have been breathed to him, unless

some sweet sacred moment should tempt her to confide it and seek forgiveness for deceiving him! What must he be feeling?

—"Of help of such a kind I trust there may be no further need, but your advice I shall ever value highly, as of old. I am making the best of things, I confess it, but if the reality prove too far inferior to your anticipations, I beg of you to blame not me, but the kind communication from your sister which has emboldened me to address you.

"I await your answer in consuming anxiety.

"Yours always to command,

"GILBERT BERRINGER."

Lettice read and re-read the letter with growing bewilderment and anxiety, which deepened into positive fear. Did Gilbert want her to come, or not? His letter was too calm, too judicial. Five words—"Lettice, come; I want you"—would have swept away the doubts that beset her, but instead there were these stilted phrases, with their dreadful hints about the money and a letter which some one—Emily, no doubt—had written. There was the memory of his coldness and silence during the last two years—amply justified, doubtless, in his opinion—and to set against it was the horrible possibility that Emily had told him her sister was pining under his aloofness, complicated by his discovering that he was under a heavy monetary obligation to her. Terror gripped Lettice—the terror of change, of new scenes and new faces, of which she had spoken to Agnes. For Gilbert's sake she could have faced it, but to run the gauntlet of all these agonising experiences and find an indifferent Gilbert at the end——! She looked round in desperation. Everything here seemed so safe—all the narrow ways in which she had walked all her life. Dull they might be, but so comfortingly safe. For the moment, the acme of happiness seemed to be to go on as she had always done, teaching in the school, visiting in the parish, holding Dorcas meetings in turn with

other maiden ladies who would call her "Dear Miss Tourneur" and exchange paper patterns of charity garments, working for the missionary basket, keeping down the week's accounts. Even the red brick box had its charms now, and there was something consoling in the thought of Theodosia's watchful patronage. If she listened to Gilbert, she must tear herself away from everything and every one familiar, and travel half round the globe under the unsympathetic protection of Peter. If it was to find at the close of the voyage a Gilbert who did not want her, she could not do it.

A red spark in the garden attracted her as she walked restlessly past her window, and after a moment's alarm, she realised that it came from Peter's cigar. Throwing a shawl over her head, she ran down the back stairs, and burst upon him like a whirlwind.

"Peter!" she gripped him by the arm, "you must tell me. Does Gilbert want me to come, or not?"

"If he says so, I suppose he knows." Peter tried in vain to release his arm, but Lettice continued to grasp it, and shook him unconsciously in her impatience.

"Don't talk to me like that! Don't you know how much it matters? Does Gilbert want me?"

"How on earth am I to know, if you won't believe him?"

"You must be able to tell. Did he seem as if he did?"

"There's nothing of the gusher about him, if you mean that. No one would have said he was thinking about getting married at all."

"Then what made him send the letter?"

"Do you want the actual truth?"

"Of course—yes."

"Well, you have to thank Emily for it. She wrote to him."

"Telling him to——? asking him to——?"

"I don't know the whys and the wherefores of it,

but he said to me that though it wasn't the time he would have chosen——"

"Peter!" Lettice had released his arm, and stood transfixed.

"Well, what's a man to do? It's not as if it would do him any good to get married. It would be the ruin of Bandeir."

"Ruin Bandeir? How?"

"Why, it's like this." Peter was really stirred now, and in all good faith gave voice to the earnest conviction that was in him—far too earnest to allow him to ask himself whether he was really speaking in Gilbert's interest or in that of his own ideal of the Eveless Eden that Bandeir ought to be. "Things are about as bad as they can be in Bandeir, and Gilbert's rule is above all a personal one—of course you can't really understand these matters of government, but you can take my word for it. Unless he can keep in close connection with the people, he's done. He is accessible to them all day, of course, but what they value most is the reception he holds every evening, when anybody can come who likes. They sit round in rows two or three deep and smoke, and when any one has anything to say, he says it. He explains the measures he is proposing, and they criticize and ask questions, so that everything is thoroughly threshed out, and he has them with him all the way. All the European assistants are there too, of course—at least, they always used to be. But since Petherton and Unwin got married, their wives kick up a shindy if they go—say they want their husbands in the evenings and mustn't be left alone. We were all so jolly and friendly before they came, but those women have played the very mischief with Bandeir."

"But—couldn't they go with their husbands?" asked Lettice falteringly. She felt Peter's contempt in the dark.

"I wonder at you, Lettice—saying such a silly thing as that! Not a Malay would come near the place, of course, if they weren't allowed to smoke—let alone

that they wouldn't let a woman come within a mile of a serious conversation. They have a little sense."

Lettice passed over meekly the aspersion on her sex. "But if Gilbert knows it would harm Bandeir, why does he ask me to come?" she murmured.

"Why, ain't that Gilbert all over? Same chivalrous old fool that he ever was—ruin all his own hopes sooner than hurt a lady's feelings. And he would never let you see it, neither. Oh, I daresay he tries to persuade himself it wouldn't be so bad, and manages to get up a sort of enthusiasm about it, but the question is—are you going to accept the sacrifice when you know what Bandeir means to him?"

"You are quite sure—it is—a sacrifice?"

"Certain. I would take my dying oath on it. Mind"—Peter made a tremendous effort to be impartial—"I daresay he wouldn't object to having you there in ordinary circumstances, but when it means losing Bandeir——!"

"Yes, I see. I was afraid——"

"I knew you always had plenty of sense, if you cared to use it. Tell you what, you're far better at home—better off, too, with your books and all that. Now Gilbert might say, 'Here's a nice quiet time for you to be getting on with your writing,' but he would be in and out every two minutes wanting you to do something else. Not much fun there for you—eh?"

"Try not to be more foolish than you can help, Peter!" The old nursery insult reached Peter through the darkness, as Lettice turned and rushed into the house, and he stared after her with absolute incredulity.

"Nice way to talk to her brother when he's trying to keep her from making a fool of herself!" he said, much injured, and realised with disgust that in the stress of the conversation his cigar had gone out. In her own room Lettice was writing her letter—at once, lest her determination should fail her. What was the good of asking herself whether Gilbert had not intentionally dwelt on the dark side of the picture, lest his

own wishes should bias her against her better judgment? Did she not know beyond question that Emily had practically demanded that he should marry her, and that he felt himself under the obligation to do so on account of that wretched two thousand pounds? It was better to be a poverty-stricken old maid in England than to reign in Bandeir as the wife of a man who regretted his marriage every day of his life, even though he "never let her see it."

It was best both for herself and him that they should give up all thoughts of marriage, she wrote, avoiding with scrupulous anxiety every semblance of a reason. If he thought she was afraid to face the new life in a strange country, even with him, he must think so; she was afraid, unless he really wanted her. Her letter was final, in every line, and she felt that he would accept it as such. No ordinary self-respecting man would court another refusal after the series of discouragements he had received, and Gilbert's self-respect might be said to be acute. With her own hands she had put him out of her life, and she must reconstruct it from its ruins, with Gilbert left out. She must ask Charles to take the red brick box for her at once. Dear Charles! so good and kind and straightforward—a true English gentleman. You always knew where you were with him—no mysteries and uncertainties about his sayings and doings. Theodosia might well think herself a fortunate woman—— No, she might not! It would be more interesting to be Gilbert's wife for a year than Charles's for the whole of his blameless existence—more, it was better to love Gilbert hopelessly from a distance than to be married to Charles.

The time came near for Lettice to leave Sniddingly. Charles and Theodosia had returned home, and Charles, as his wife wrote, "was amusing himself so happily" with getting Lettice's little domain into order for her. Peter had gone to London, ostensibly to oversee the packing of the many things he had been charged to get for Gilbert, but really because

he had taken it into his head, on the strength of two or three invitations to dine at the Hall, that Mrs Berringer was "trying to catch him" for Adelaide—than which a more unjust aspersion on the good lady's character can hardly be imagined. Emily drove over frequently to give Lettice advice as to the disposal of the furniture, and otherwise cheer her up. The cheering was very necessary, though the advice might have been dispensed with. Life looked very grey and flat and dreary to Lettice in these days. Even the thought of her writing did not bring any comfort, for no new book had as yet suggested itself. There was something ineffably depressing in the vista of accustomed duties and economies. Once before—when she read Gilbert's letter of renunciation—she had felt something of the same kind, but then she had not closed the door on happiness by her own act. To a character formed in an environment like hers there is infinitely more moral satisfaction in being a victim than a free agent.

It was her last evening at the Rectory. Emily had left her in the dismantled house reproachfully—it was so droll of Lettice to want to stay when everything was turned upside-down. Rebecca had taken her departure, and was installed in one of the cottages by the church—picturesque, but inconvenient to the last degree. All day long Lettice and Jerusha had taken down pictures and packed books and corded boxes, until, inactive because no more could be done till morning, the maid was able to repose, like a virtuous Marius, on the solitary chair left in the kitchen, and the mistress to drag herself idly from one to another of the well-known rooms, looking so strange in their bareness. An extraordinary restlessness was upon her; she could not sit down, even after such a day of unceasing fatigue. In her wanderings she came to her own room, and from force of habit went to draw the curtains, standing idle for a moment with her hands upon them, in sheer numbness of mind. All her life Lettice had been conscious

of an unreasoning terror of looking out from a lighted window or doorway into the dark—the terror of seeing, even of discerning the approach of, something monstrous, horrible. Even now, when she realised where she was standing, she made a quick movement to draw the curtain she held, but as she did so, she became aware that she did see something—a light where no light could possibly be. It was not the red glow of a cigar this time, it was the light of a candle, stuck in the neck of a bottle, and it stood upon a packing-case, together with a basin containing food of some sort. The wall which it illuminated looked as if it was made of a kind of coarse basket-work, and from a thorn or some other projection in it there hung a watch, a large old-fashioned gold repeater. It was Gilbert's watch, which had belonged to his grandfather; Lettice remembered his being invested with it, as with an order, on his fifteenth birthday. To the right of the watch a huge stiff leaf was stuck into the basket-work by its stalk, and cast a monstrous shadow which threw all beyond it into shade. Nevertheless, Lettice could distinguish a bed with a figure lying upon it, and some one crouched beside it, evidently slumbering. There was a little noise close to her. It was a rat, she could see its bright eyes shining in the candlelight. She shuffled her feet to drive it away, but it took no notice, advancing cautiously towards the box and the food in the basin. The figure on the bed stirred and moaned feebly, and the person beside it woke with a start. A yellow hand moved the leaf aside, and Lettice saw the wizened yellow face of the owner—a Chinaman, she thought, but he had a gaily coloured handkerchief twisted round his head. It was Gilbert who lay on the bed. She could see his gaunt arms flung wide as though in a desperate fight with the heat, the beads of sweat upon his brow. The rat scuttled away as the watcher stretched himself and came forward. He trod softly, but the matting floor gave beneath his tread. There was the sound of

water lapping against wood somewhere close at hand—it almost seemed as if it was under the floor. The yellow man took the watch off its peg and regarded it closely, then pressed the handle—she knew somehow that it was because he liked the sound rather than because he could not read the hands—and it struck three. Apparently satisfied, he put the watch back, took up the bowl, and raising Gilbert's head, forced some of the food into his mouth—clumsily, but not unkindly. The result was astonishing. Gilbert sat up, his eyes, bright and burning, met Lettice's, and he stretched out his hands. "It is you—I knew it!" he said weakly. "At last, Lettice! I thought you would never come."

"But I am coming—now—at once!" she cried, even as she saw the old native's eyes searching curiously in her direction, as though to see to whom his master was speaking. No perception came into them. He did not see her, but her voice broke the spell. She was looking out of her window into the dark.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE COMFORTRESS OF UNSUCCESS.

LETTICE went swiftly down the back stairs, and found Jerusha dozing uneasily on the hard kitchen chair, with her head against the wall. She woke up and smiled a little foolishly as her mistress came in.

"Was you wanting anything, miss?"

"I am going to London, Jerusha. I have had a—
a message. I must start at once."

"But not to-night, miss? There ain't no more trains."

"I must get to Abbotsbridge to-night, to Mrs Akehurst—she will take me in—and go on in the morning."

"Not alone, miss—all that way by yourself in the dark? You'll let me come?"

"Yes, why not? Put a few things together. We will take your master's old carpet-bag, and carry it between us."

Jerusha stood staring after her as she left the kitchen. Miss Lettice seemed to know just what to do, there was not the faintest touch of uncertainty about voice or manner, and yet every single arrangement she had made with Mrs Charles and Mrs Sedhurst was about to be upset. Jerusha, who had her own ideas about those ladies, smiled a little grimly as she raked out the fire. If only—oh, if only—Miss Lettice had found a beau for herself at

last, thanks to whom she might take her stand proudly in the ranks of the married ladies!

"I've left everything safe downstairs, miss, and I'll just run round to 'Becca's with the cat and the door-key when we're out of the house," said the handmaiden, bringing her bundle to Lettice's room, and panting with excitement rather than fatigue. "But what would you think of me running round to Mr Puttick's, and askin' if so be he could oblige you with the gig to get to Abbotsbridge very important?"

"It's no good, Jerusha. I thought of it myself, but it's Rencaster market-day, you know, right in the opposite direction, and they will all be on that road. No, we must walk."

The prospect was not an inviting one on a November evening, but Jerusha was upheld by an excitement that no discomforts could have daunted, and Lettice was remote from all mundane matters for the time. What she did was done mechanically, but she forgot nothing, neither money for the journey nor Peter's brief scrawl with the address of his London lodgings. Though it was November, the roads were fortunately fairly dry, and they toiled along in the dark, sometimes carrying the bag by a handle apiece, at others suspending it on Lettice's umbrella — country-people's umbrellas were made strong in those days, happily. Decorous Abbotsbridge was fast asleep—or at least safe within doors—when they came to the pavements and the oil lamps at last, and when they knocked at Mr Akehurst's door it was the owner himself, in a high state of perturbation, who opened it to them, with his wife, a shawl partially concealing her curl-papers, looking over his shoulder.

Their bewilderment when the candlelight flashed on Lettice's pale face was extreme, but they rose to the occasion nobly; and if Mr Akehurst did carry off the impression that Miss Tourneur was running away to marry Sir Gilbert Berringer against the wishes

of both her family and his, it could hardly be wondered at in the prevailing confusion. Jerusha was entrusted to the care of the hastily roused servant, whose grin of astonished welcome was a sight to see, and Mrs Akehurst conducted Lettice solemnly to the spare room, which, as she remarked with appropriate self-satisfaction, was kept aired, and not, like some people's, left to get damp for months at a time. In the morning the Good Samaritans provided a huge breakfast at an early hour, and Mrs Akehurst herself escorted her visitors to the station, followed by the apprentice carrying the carpet-bag. While they waited for the train, she discoursed loftily on the far greater convenience of the coach, which used to pick you up at the cross-roads just outside Sniddingly when you had to go to London suddenly on business, instead of your having to foot it all these miles to the station. Nor did she content herself with thus setting matters on an impeccable footing in the hearing of the station-master and porter, who were the greatest gossips of the place, for not by word or deed did she show Lettice that she thought there was anything strange or out of the way about her sudden determination. Her air of ladylike detachment affected even Jerusha, whose first railway journey this was, but who tried hard to look as if she travelled by train every day. It is true that the actual start overcame her calmness, but when she had repressed her little squeaks of terror, and left off trying to hold on to something, she asked of her mistress with creditable sangfroid—

“Be I to go to the Indies with you, miss?”

“I should be very glad to take you if you wished to go, Jerusha,” said Lettice, smiling; and Jerusha, who was an orphan, rose to a sublime pitch of loyalty.

“Well, miss, we all has to die some day, they say, and seein’ as there’s no one to follow me wherever I am, as well die in the Indies as in Sniddingly, says I. O-o-o-oh! what’s that?”

“It’s only a tunnel, Jerusha! There! it’s past now.

Look at the men ploughing in the field," and for the rest of the journey Jerusha, with open mouth and round eyes, found abundant occupation in watching the places and people they passed. When they reached the terminus, Lettice could hardly get her into a cab, so much overcome was she by the noise and multitude of the vehicles, and all the way through the streets she was bouncing from one window to the other, as new marvels met her astonished eyes. At Peter's lodgings she and the London servant, with torn and flapping cap, dirty white stockings, and slippers down at heel, eyed one another with marked disfavour, and were each plainly conscious of a desire to tell the other what she thought of her. For this there was no opportunity, however, for at Lettice's request the maid led them straight to Peter's sitting-room, from which proceeded the sound of vigorous hammering. Peter, in his shirt-sleeves, was packing tin-lined cases, with the assistance of his Chinese servant, whom he had considerately left in London when he came to Sniddingly, lest he should occasion too much disturbance at the Rectory. Kneeling on the top of a case, with his back to the door and his mouth full of nails, Peter had no idea of the visitors' presence until he saw the Chinaman staring. Then he faced round suddenly, and almost swallowed the nails when he found two female figures in deep mourning standing inside the door. Lettice was unrecognisable through her crape veil, and the impression of Jerusha that forced itself upon him was of round eyes in a round face framed in a round black bonnet such as is now only worn by old women in an out-of-date workhouse or lady motorists of extreme smartness.

"I assure you, ma'am, there's some mistake," he said distractedly. "'Pon my honour, ladies, this is a private room." He was edging towards his coat and trying to get rid of the nails at the same moment.

Lettice tried to throw back her veil, but her hands trembled too much. "Peter!" she cried, in a voice

shrill with anxiety, "have you sent off my letter to Gilbert?" This was the terror that had beset her since her vision—the fear that she was too late to save Gilbert the blow after all.

"Nonsense! of course not. Got it to give him."

"Then give it back to me. I am going out to him—coming with you." She was strung up to face any amount of opposition from Peter. If he would not take her with him, she meant to announce that she would go alone. But it was evident to her at once that he received the news with a certain amount of relief. As a matter of fact, he had a conscience somewhere, though he kept it in such strict order that it did not trouble him much, and it had been pricking him about the confidence Gilbert had reposed in him. Was he quite sure that he had executed his commission in the spirit in which it had been given? Therefore he replied with unexpected amiability.

"Oh, all right. But you needn't make a scene about it, if you have changed your mind—shouting it all over the place. We can't sail to-day, you know."

"But when, when? Gilbert is ill, and wants me."

Peter eyed her with disfavour. "You can't possibly have heard that, for if a ship had come in, I should have known."

"I'll tell you another time. When can we start?"

"Not till the ship sails—week after next. Oh, well, I know I did say it might be this week, but it ain't. I should have run down to say good-bye," sulkily. "And you'll want all that time to get your 'things'"—contemptuously—"I'll wager. Did the Squire and Mrs B. come up with you?"

"They know nothing about it. I haven't seen them. I only had the—the message last night, and we started at once—walked to Abbotsbridge, and stayed at Mrs Akehurst's."

"Well, well! what queer things females will do when they take a notion into their heads!" said Peter indulgently, rejoiced to find himself restored to his proper position of masculine superiority.

"Why, my good girl, do you think you can go out to marry the Berringers' son without telling them anything about it? And what about Theodosia and Emily? They'll think you have gone off your head—and not so far wrong, neither. And you were going to Aunt Sophy to-day, weren't you? Why, those two poor old tabbies will be distracted. I declare I shall have to send them a telegraphic message!"

"Oh no!" cried Lettice, appalled by the thought of this desperate expedient. "They would be terrified out of their wits. But I can't go there—except just to say good-bye. Oh, Peter, please help me! I'll do anything you say."

"Then if you really mean to take my advice, we will go down home by the earliest train we can catch, and get all the explanations over as soon as possible. Er—er—about your changing your mind—what shall we——?"

"Oh, Peter, you must never, never tell! Promise me faithfully never to say a word. To Gilbert especially—but all of them—I won't go near Sniddingly again unless you do."

"All right, all right!" said Peter soothingly. "We'll keep it between ourselves. After all, it's no business of theirs."

And this attitude he maintained in the face of his justly aggrieved family. When he and Lettice returned to Sniddingly, they found the place in something as near approaching commotion as it could achieve. Emily had driven over, urged by the extraordinary rumour that Lettice had been seen on the platform of Abbotsbridge station that morning, a messenger had been sent to summon Charles and Theodosia, and the Squire was cross-examining Rebecca as to what she knew of the mysterious disappearance of her late mistress. The favourite theory was that Lettice, distracted by grief for the loss of her father, had rushed away in a frenzy, and public opinion was fixing upon the unwilling Ralph—who urged that even if he found her, he could not

make her come back against her will—as the proper person to go after her at once. He was alone in feeling the explanation put forward by the returned runaway amply sufficient. Lettice had received through Peter a letter from Gilbert asking her to come out to him, and had hurried to London to make arrangements for her passage, fearing to lose a moment. That was all very well, as Emily and Theodosia told each other indignantly, and Mrs Berringer dinned into the ears of her reluctant spouse, but why should things have been left so long? Lettice and Peter were both evasive when questioned, and it was practically certain that Peter had forgotten or mislaid the letter, and then, coming upon it in the course of his packing, had sent it by post, throwing Lettice, very naturally, into such a state of excitement that nothing would satisfy her but that absurd journey to London. Only, why she should choose to go on shielding Peter when his carelessness had caused so much inconvenience, Emily and Theodosia could not see. Still, she was behaving very properly in begging that the money left by her father should now be equally divided between her and her sisters, and she was fulfilling the whole duty of woman in getting married at last, so that they agreed to overlook her culpable weakness towards Peter. As for Mrs Berringer, she accepted the sudden and disastrous close to her ten years' duel with Lettice in a spirit of fatalism. She might have known that almost before the poor dear Rector was cold in his grave, his daughter would set his declared wishes at defiance, but she had not expected it.

Fortunately there was very little time for threshing out the whys and the wherefores of the matter. The Squire had only attended Lettice about for a day or two with great pride and delight before she had to go to London to make her preparations, and here Mrs Gantley insisted on taking her in for her last fortnight in England. The perusal of the manuscript of *Lillah* had completed the removal of any hard feelings that Messrs Gantley & Lehigh might have cherished against

the author, and they offered an arrangement which, if less dramatic than the stand-and-deliver terms to which they had perforce assented in the case of *Marmaduke Garnier*, was likely to be eventually even more profitable to Lettice. With an eye to future paragraphs, they suggested that "in view of the unusual and romantic circumstances," some slight relaxation might be advisable in the strictness of Bliss Turner's incognito, and Lettice, feeling that events on this side of the world would henceforth have but little interest for her, consented on the condition that no names were mentioned. She was herself again now that there was a definite path of duty before her. This is not to say that spasms of terror at her venture into the unknown did not seize her occasionally, but she could fight them down, because Gilbert wanted her. The fact that in any case Sniddingly was no longer a possible refuge helped her, for to her shy spirit a village in the next county, with its circle of new faces, was little less awe-inspiring than a dusky kingdom half-way across the world.

Days of choosing and buying and being fitted, of listening gratefully to contradictory advice from all the elder ladies of Mrs Gantley's acquaintance and ungratefully sifting it afterwards, a hurried visit to Brighton to bid farewell to Aunt Sophy, who cried over her and blessed her and presented her with the Spanish lace shawl, a final gathering of Berringers and Sedhursts to say good-bye, and the time came at last for the ship to sail. To her astonishment and alarm, Lettice found herself something like a public character on arriving on board, while Peter, to his excessive indignation, was relegated to quite a secondary place. Laden, much against his will, with a bundle of rugs and a *sac de nuit*—a useful receptacle which emulated the modern hold-all in containing everything that could not be got in anywhere else—he dumped them in Lettice's cabin with the cheering prophecy that Gilbert would soon get sick of her if she expected him to carry her parcels for her. But the long voyage—which involved cross-

ing the Atlantic twice, since the accepted route to the Cape was by way of Rio de Janeiro—was destined to be a time of education for Peter. Lettice and Jerusha were the only women on board, and while Jerusha collected proposals of marriage from the ship's company, so the captain said, as if she was picking buttercups in a meadow, her mistress was the centre of interest to the passengers. Lettice in a white gown and a shady hat was a revelation to Peter, and so also was Lettice—at first with trembling diffidence, then with more and more assurance—holding her own at a table full of men. He scoffed openly at first, and in private assured himself that the deference shown to her opinions was of a piece with the absurd attention paid her—pure chivalry to a woman doing a plucky, if eminently proper thing. But gradually, very gradually, it began to penetrate to his consciousness that the general resentment visible when he snubbed her in the old accustomed way was not solely due to chivalry. She had something to say that was worth saying, and if he had no respect for her opinions, other people had. It was disconcerting, too, to find that she grew less easy to snub; in fact, if she had not been so well brought up, Peter would almost have suspected her of possessing a mind of her own. Little by little, the force of the example of those around him told, and by the end of the voyage Peter was educated up to the pitch of moving his sister's chair out of the sun, or fetching her a shawl from the cabin. Nevertheless, when the crew and passengers mustered at the bulwarks when she left the ship at Singapore for the *Hope*, and gave her three times three, and three cheers more for Sir Gilbert Berringer, he was emphatically of opinion that the thing was being overdone.

Gilbert was not at Singapore to meet them, and Peter was unreasonably irritated because Lettice said she knew he would not be. He had the contempt of the obstinate materialist for the vision which had changed the current of her life, and hated any refer-

ence to it. Edward Donnellan's letter, which came by the *Hope*, saying that Gilbert, though he had never shaken off the bad attack of fever from which he had suffered five months before, was much better in spirits, and struggled on, doing most of his work from his bed, he received as a personal insult. Over the postscript that when the *Hope* arrived with Lettice on board, Gilbert particularly begged that the signal *L.* might be made from the mouth of the river, he waxed sarcastic. "Might at least have said *if*, and not *when*!" he remarked. Lettice made no comment. Peter would never understand.

The signal was duly made, and on her way up the river the *Hope* was met by a prahu carrying the Donnellans. Gilbert had sworn to be up and dressed to greet Lettice when she reached Bandeir if it killed him, they said, and meanwhile they were deputed to welcome her. Agnes and she had so much to say to one another that the thronging boats crowded with gaily-dressed people full of interest and curiosity passed almost unnoticed, and long before Lettice expected it they were in the Bandeir reach, with the *Golden Helen*, dressed with all the flags that could be mustered, firing a salute, and her crew—very mixed now, since the original Europeans had been largely replaced by Malays—crowding to the side to cheer. Somehow or other Lettice must have quitted the *Hope*, though she could never remember anything about it afterwards, for she found herself mounting what seemed a very dangerous ladder, and emerging on a mat-floored verandah. Then there came a sensation that she recognised, for the floor gave to her foot, as she had felt it do in her dream, and at the same moment her eyes met those of a very washed-out-looking Gilbert, as white as his clothes, supported on one side by a doctor and on the other by a wizened elderly man whose yellow face was surmounted by a coloured handkerchief. In the tumult of the greetings she found herself saying to Gilbert, in a voice that she hardly knew for her own—

"That is your servant who looks after you when you are ill."

He looked at her with instant understanding as he dropped into a chair. "Yes," he said, "this is Mr Lo, generally known as 'the poor Indian,' because he is a China-Malay." Mr Lo, taking the mention of his name as an introduction, bowed profoundly, and withdrawing his wrists into his sleeves, shook hands with himself warmly several times. "I should never have pulled through but for him."

"But he goes to sleep," said Lettice, still in the same odd tone.

"Yes, his other name is the Seven Sleepers. Nobody else can sleep when he is doing it, though. You know all about him."

The others had faded away somehow and left them together, Gilbert in a long chair, Lettice sitting beside him. He touched a flounce of her muslin gown.

"I am so glad you ain't wearing black. You were when I saw you—with a big apron over it."

"Yes—to save my crape." It seemed strange to neither of them to dash without a word of preface into the experience they alone shared.

"You were looking out of window, and I was looking in. It was your room at the Rectory, wasn't it—with the snuff-coloured curtains? There was a candle behind you. You looked all eyes—frightfully tired."

"Gilbert"—her voice dropped—"how was it? What happened?"

"How can I tell? No one will believe it, but you and I know. I was precious miserable—ill, and worried by a lot of extra troubles, floods, and so on, and one of the new men had got into a mess with his district, and I couldn't go to put things right. Then—because I was thinking a good deal about you, I suppose—it came to me suddenly that I had no right whatever to expect you, I ought to have known better, because it was you"—Lettice murmured pro-

test—"but I saw all at once that you would be quite justified in refusing to come with Peter, and saying that if I wanted you I should have come for you myself—which of course I couldn't. I felt as if I must know somehow; I should die if I didn't. It was like a fire burning me up. Donnellan got it out of me that I was praying for a sign, and he put on his clerical face—I'll do him the justice to say he don't do it often—and said that when a thing was manifestly impossible, it would be better to pray that the desire might be removed. I tried to throw my slippers at him, and missed, and Agnes came and tried to calm me down, but I only got more excited, and they had to leave me to old Lo. And then, you know, I was there."

"No!" said Lettice. "I was here."

"Well, at least we saw one another, which is what mattered, and I knew. And when I told Agnes the next morning, she said she would thank God for the beautiful dream I had had. *Dream!* when I saw you and talked to you. But after that I never had a moment's doubt. Of course I ought not to have had before. I ought to have known that though no other woman would have come out at short notice to marry a man who had failed in everything he undertook, lost all his money, and only just not been found guilty of piracy, you would. But it wasn't likely, you know. You must forgive me."

"Gilbert, don't!" It was Lettice's turn to make confession. "I can't let you go on thinking me so much better than I am. I very nearly—no, I did do it. I wrote to say I couldn't come."

"You had changed your mind?" His voice was barely audible.

"No, no—never! But I thought—you didn't want me."

He laughed with relief. "You found out you were wrong, then? Why should I have asked you to come, pray?"

"I thought—it was because of what Emily had

said—and the money—the two thousand pounds, you know.”

“Ah, the two thousand pounds! And you still think so?”

“Gilbert! how could I? After I saw you?”

“That was what I hoped. And now let me tell you that I never had an idea until this moment that the two thousand pounds was yours. I knew you had helped with those letters to the *Times*, but we thought we had traced the money quite satisfactorily to a great-aunt of Blanchard’s. As the good lady was so anxious to be unknown, it seemed better not to intrude my thanks upon her.”

“Then you need never have known—if I had not told you! Oh, Gilbert, do you mind very much?”

“I should have minded uncommonly, I can tell you, if you had not come out. As it is—well, what can I say? If I scolded you for wasting your poor little money upon Bandeir, you might very fairly ask me what I have done with all mine. Now I have an answer ready whenever you reproach me with extravagance.”

“Even the rearguard fights sometimes,” murmured Lettice.

“To be sure it does. But to think of your remembering that old thing! Do you know——? Oh, hang it! here are these fellows coming back! Why can’t they let us have a talk?”

“I know we are intruding,” said Edward Donnellan penitently, “and I am going to intrude still further. May I venture to ask whether you have settled the day yet?”

“Really, Mr Donnellan!” cried Lettice, with hot indignation. “We have not said a word about anything of the sort.”

“My reason for asking was that the doctor is most anxious to send Sir Gilbert off for a cruise in the *Hope*, and as Peter is here to take charge of things——”

“No need to apologise,” said Gilbert pleasantly. “And I hope not much need for delay. To-day, if

Lettice will be so good——” he held out his hand to her; “if not, to-morrow.”

“May as well get it over,” said Peter, in the lugubrious tone of one who saw his brightest hopes for Bandeir on the verge of being irretrievably blasted. “And”—with a sudden relapse into old bad ways—“Lettice will do as she is told, I should hope.”

“For the last time in her life.” Mr Donnellan saved the situation gaily, and in all good faith. “Ever afterwards, as I know by experience, it is Sir Gilbert who will do as he is told.”

THE END.

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